

Century Cures Act, which includes—I am going to repeat this several times—true bipartisan victories for patients in our health care system.

Throughout my time in Congress, I have been a consistent supporter of funding for the National Institutes of Health, or NIH, to fulfill our commitment to prioritizing biomedical research and innovation. NIH research returns priceless benefits, giving health care providers new tools and drugs to heal and give hope to individuals. The benefits of this research investment to Kansans back home have been direct and personal. Back in 2012, the University of Kansas Cancer Center received a National Cancer Institute designation, or an NCI designation. These centers are major players in research and development for cancer treatment and prevention.

The legislation we will be voting on today or tomorrow—or at the very least next week—does commit an additional \$1.8 billion for Vice President BIDEN's Cancer Moonshot. This will not only help the University of Kansas as they continue to push toward a comprehensive cancer center designation, but it will help all Americans who stand to benefit as we work to end the fight against cancer.

In addition to research funding, this bill includes some provisions I authored along with Senator KLOBUCHAR to improve and increase transparency in the review and approval of processes for medical devices. Specifically, the bill does this. It encourages the FDA, or the Food and Drug Administration, to accept international consensus standards to provide more predictability for innovators. Second, it makes improvements to the advisory committee selection process in an effort to provide more transparency. It provides a technical correction to establish a process by which the Food and Drug Administration may remove certain products from the class I device reserve list if they think a premarket review is no longer necessary to prove reasonable assurances of safety and effectiveness. Senators ISAKSON, CASEY, and ROBERTS' priorities seek to provide more certainty for FDA review of combination products and therapies that do not fit neatly into simply a drug or device.

The legislation also includes important reforms to our mental health system based largely on a bill the HELP Committee passed earlier this year. With this section of the bill, we seek to clarify and improve our mental health parity laws. We reauthorized the substance abuse and mental health block grants. We promote evidence-based practices to ensure we are utilizing our scarce resources on programs that work and not continuing to fund what doesn't work. We reauthorized the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act for suicide prevention and intervention and the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative.

There is a lot more work to be done, obviously, to address the deficiencies

in our current system, but this bipartisan bill is certainly a good step in the right direction toward improving access to mental health services and eliminating the stigma of seeking treatment.

Finally, the 21st Century Cures Act includes numerous priorities that my colleagues on the Finance Committee and I have been working on for several years. One provision I was proud to support in committee extends the Rural Community Hospital Demonstration Program for another 5 years. As our rural hospitals continue to try and make ends meet, this program helps what we call "tweener" hospitals survive. Hospitals that do not qualify as critical access hospitals would not survive under the current Medicare payment system. It is a critical program that benefits Kansans in Junction City, Ulysses, and Fort Scott by keeping their hospital and access care open.

There is more rural relief. Senators THUNE, CRAPO, and I have championed a provision to protect rural access to durable medical equipment under the Competitive Bidding Program. We would have liked to have seen a more permanent solution. However, this bill delays applying competitively bid prices of rural areas and requires the Department of Health and Human Services to take into account stakeholder input as well as average travel distance, volume of items, services furnished, and the number of suppliers in these areas when determining adjustments in setting bid prices.

I have the privilege of being the co-chairman of the Senate Rural Health Caucus. I know how critically important these and other pieces of the package are for our beleaguered rural health care system. There is no question that we have many challenges ahead. While this package may not be a silver bullet to ensure cures for all that ails us, it sets priorities in research, cancer, cancer precision medicine, regenerative medicine, and heart-breaking diseases like Alzheimer's through the BRAIN Initiative. We all know someone affected by these dreaded diseases. It also makes significant changes in how these new therapies are evaluated, hopefully approved, and delivered to patients, providing more tools in the medicine cabinet that will improve many lives. Advances in medical research benefit us all, and this bill does just that.

I wish to make a comment with regard to previous discussions of this bill on the floor of the Senate. Unfortunately, a very small minority of my colleagues want to criticize and even villainize this legislation and those who worked so hard on it, which is terribly disappointing to me. With the passage of this bill, both Republicans and Democrats can take pride in putting together and working toward a bipartisan bill that lives up to its name—the 21st Century Cures Act. I regret the tone of the debate that took place with regard to this bill and the personal comments that were made.

I will remind my colleagues that there is a rule XIX that the distinguished Presiding Officer can invoke at any time and any Senator can ask that a Senator's words be taken down under rule XIX. I only say it so that we can look upon a bipartisan bill like this and say: Look at what we have done. Let's be proud of it and certainly not get into the mud with regard to any personal comments.

I urge my colleagues to advance research, advance the development treatments, and support this bill. It is a good bill. It is a bipartisan bill that we should all be proud of.

I thank the Presiding Officer and yield back.

21ST CENTURY CURES BILL

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, today I wish to support the 21st Century Cures Act, the bill currently before us that, if all goes well, will be approved by the Senate very shortly.

This important legislation represents the hard work of Members from both parties and from both sides of the Capitol. It has support across the economic and ideological spectrum and promises to do quite a bit of good for a number of people.

Put simply—or as simply as one can for a measure of this size—the 21st Century Cures Act represents a significant investment in improving our ability to discover and develop new treatments and medicines and ensure that patients have access to them.

To accomplish this goal, this legislation, among many other things, provides a much-needed expansion of funding for the National Institutes of Health, improvements to the approval process at the Food and Drug Administration, resources to respond to the growing opioid abuse crisis, and an updated government framework for addressing mental health needs.

Thanks to this bill, universities across Utah will be able to access the funding streams from the Precision Medicine Initiative, the BRAIN Initiative, and the Cancer Moonshot. Utah is known for its ability to leverage significant public-private partnerships to work towards cutting-edge health and innovation. I am proud to represent a State where complex technologies are being utilized to help patients find the best treatments and avoid interventions that would be costly, invasive, and ineffective.

Over the past several months, I have had several meaningful experiences working to improve health care for the people of Utah and for all Americans. For example, I had the pleasure of welcoming Vice President BIDEN to the Huntsman Cancer Institute in Utah as part of his Cancer Research Center tour.

The Vice President and I had an insightful discussion about a number of promising therapies being developed in Utah. This legislation will provide an infusion of funding for these types of

projects that will improve lives for individuals and families across our country and around the world.

Among the many noteworthy provisions in this bill are several items advocated by members of the Senate Finance Committee, which I chair. Throughout the 114th Congress, the Finance Committee has worked tirelessly to advance a number of bipartisan legislative efforts and address the concerns of our Members' constituents.

We have reported more bills out of the committee in this Congress than really in any other Congress in modern history, all of them—every single one—with bipartisan support. The long list includes bills in virtually every area of the Finance Committee's jurisdiction, including health care policy.

Some of these priorities—and many others—have been included in the Cures Act.

All told, the current version of the bill includes at least 22 separate provisions that reflect the hard work of Finance Committee members. These include modifications and updates to Medicare, Medicaid, and SCHIP, along with other important changes to the law.

I want to collectively thank the members of the Finance Committee for the work they have done on these measures and on everything else we have been able to accomplish over the last two years.

A number of measures that I personally worked on as a member of the Senate HELP Committee have also been included in the bill. All told, about 37 provisions in this bill are ones that I either drafted or helped draft at some point during my years in the Senate.

For now, I want to focus on my work to help those in the rare disease community. Millions of Americans suffer from unexplainable illnesses that leave them feeling abandoned and alone. And, if we do not address the dry pipeline for drugs that end up treating just a few hundred patients, we are making a national decision that these people do not matter.

None of us should accept that.

To address these concerns, I worked to include specific measures in the Cures Act that improve pediatric care and expedite the drug approval process for rare diseases, ensuring that thousands of patients get the treatments they need when they need them.

With this bill, Congress will make significant steps in helping Americans with rare diseases, but our work will be far from over. Families affected by rare diseases have united around the country to speak with a growing voice, and we need to do all we can to make sure their pleas do not fall on deaf ears.

As you can see, there are a number of good things to say about the 21st Century Cures Act. However, I don't want to leave the impression that the bill is perfect from my point of view. While I support the bill and plan to vote in favor of passage, I do want to make note of what are, in my view, some of the bill's shortcomings.

As this legislation was being developed, I noted that I had concerns with some of the pay-fors that were being thrown around. I have always supported the goals of this legislation and believed it was important that we try to move it forward. However, I do not believe we should be setting undesirable precedents when it comes to funding these types of endeavors.

Early on in this process, some publicly expressed their belief that the spending in this bill could be paid for by making alterations to federal health entitlement programs, namely Medicare and Medicaid.

I will spare my colleagues a lecture on the budget process today. Instead, I will just note that, while there are a number of areas where we can responsibly find savings in these programs, we have almost always tried to avoid diverting funds from these programs—which constitute mandatory spending—to pay for discretionary spending programs.

And, put simply, I believe we need to continue following what has generally been a brightline rule in that regard. If we start casually commingling mandatory and discretionary funds, we run the risk of greatly expanding discretionary spending programs while simultaneously weakening our entitlement programs that are already on the brink of fiscal crisis.

Fortunately, the main proponents of the Cures Act have been willing to work with me, and they have scaled back their initial efforts to use the mandatory spending sources to pay for the bill. While those pay-fors haven't been entirely purged from the bill, I do not intend to vote against the legislation on that basis.

That said, I do want to make clear that this shouldn't become a legislative template or be considered a precedent for how Congress will pay for new spending in the future. And, as the chairman of the committee that has jurisdiction over most of the relevant mandatory spending programs, I intend to do all I can to make sure we avoid this practice going forward.

In addition, I want to say that I was disappointed that the bill before us does not include provisions from the Family First Prevention Services Act, which Senator WYDEN and I, along with our counterparts in the House, introduced earlier this year.

This is commonsense legislation that, in my view, would be a good fit for this vehicle. It has broad support from Members of both parties and in both Chambers, and we all worked to get it included in this package. Unfortunately, we weren't able to complete this task. So all of us will have to keep looking for any reasonable vehicle or opportunity to move this important bill in the near future.

Still, even with these concerns I have about this final version of the 21st Century Cures Act, I am strongly supportive of the bill, and I want to commend those who worked so hard to get

it this far, including Chairmen BRADY and UPTON and Speaker RYAN over in the House, and Chairman ALEXANDER, Leader MCCONNELL, and his leadership team here in the Senate.

They have all done good work, and I congratulate them on this success.

Now, we just have to pass the bill.

Once again, I intend to vote in favor of the 21st Century Cures Act, and I urge my colleagues to do the same.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Michigan.

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, first, we got a little out of order on the speaking schedule as to how it should have started this afternoon.

I ask unanimous consent that Senator NELSON go immediately after me. He has been courteous enough to allow me to speak, and I ask unanimous consent that he speak after I am done speaking.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I wish to congratulate everyone who has worked on the Cures bill. There are many areas that I have concerns about, and there are many positive things. I am looking forward to coming back as well and working with colleagues on how we complete the job on mental health by providing full funding for community mental health care across the country, which is not in the bill. But there are some positive steps forward on health care.

MEDICARE

I think it is very important, as we are coming to the end of this session in the next week or two, that we talk about the fact that when we come back, there will be incredibly important debates on health care, and one of them is what will happen to Medicare for tens of millions of seniors and people with disabilities going forward in our country. I want to take a moment to speak to that.

First of all, Medicare and Social Security are great American success stories. Those two programs have lifted a generation of seniors out of poverty and created a quality of life for them and a guarantee, after paying in all their lives, that health care and some basic economic security will be there.

I am particularly concerned right now, though, about the comments we are hearing about proposals to fundamentally change Medicare and undermine Medicare. We are hearing every day now that Medicare, as we know it, is in jeopardy of being dismantled, taking away the security and the peace of mind of tens of millions of Americans and their families across the country who are currently on Medicare—the health care guarantee of Medicare—or those who care for others or those who within the next few years will be on Medicare or who are concerned about their children.

Why are we expressing this now? First of all, the Speaker of the House said on Sunday that Medicare is burning through the budget. He has consistently said Medicare is on the verge of

bankruptcy, which is not true. It appears the goal is to scare people by telling us Medicare will not be there for our children. It will not be there only if we don't keep our commitments to Medicare and the people of this country.

I think I have heard almost every single day since the 1980s that if we want to save Medicare, we have to destroy it as a guaranteed health care system somehow. Now, we know there was a huge difference of opinion and a partisan split back when Medicare was created between Democrats and Republicans, and I am proud as a Democrat that we created Medicare and have been able to expand prescription drug coverage and other quality measures and other coverage that is so critical, but it seems like we are constantly going back in some way debating whether Medicare should exist as we know it. So we hear that to save Medicare, we have to destroy it as a guaranteed health care system—which I completely reject, as do my Democratic colleagues.

We are hearing we have to cut Medicare, we have to change it from a guarantee into a “maybe.” We also hear all kinds of different names used, whether it is a voucher system, where you get a certain amount of money in a voucher and you go to the private sector and try to buy coverage, and whatever is not covered by the voucher, you have to make up the difference. I would remind people that Medicare came into being because the private sector was not providing affordable health care for seniors and people with disabilities so we have absolutely no reason to believe that would not be the case today.

We hear about eligibility changes, premium support, means testing, and all kinds of other things that go to the very essence of what Medicare is all about. Again, Medicare is a great American success story that Americans of all ages want to see continue and be expanded upon. Regardless of what kinds of names are used, the end result is still the same. These plans are plans to take away the benefits Americans have worked their entire lives for, a system they pay into that lets them know that as we all get older, we will have the health care we need for ourselves and our families.

What is also not mentioned is the fact that Medicare is solvent through 2028, thanks to the Affordable Care Act which extended the fiscal sovereignty of Medicare. The Affordable Care Act also closed the gap in coverage—what has been called the doughnut hole—for prescription drug coverage. By the way, if the ACA is repealed, there will be another hole in that coverage and seniors' Medicare prescription drug costs are going to go back up. We have seen that Medicare, in fact, is solvent to 2028. It now actually costs less for a prescription drug today than it used to cost, and we are seeing quality efforts going on every day, preventive efforts, to continue to extend sovereignty and bring down costs.

I am all for improving Medicare. I have supported efforts to bring additional accountability and credibility into Medicare. We will continue to do that. We want to make sure it continues to be more and more effective. We want to strengthen Medicare. Cutting it, taking it from a guarantee to a maybe, is not the way to do that. In fact, it is not—despite the Speaker's own hashtag—a better way. It is not a better way.

Why am I concerned at this point? Why do we think Republicans are serious about trying to undermine Medicare as well as Medicaid, of which 80 percent of the spending goes to long-term care for senior citizens? There are two things that are deeply concerning to me. First, in every House Republican budget since 2011, everyone has effectively turned Medicare into a voucher for people eligible after 2023, 6 years from now. It would raise the costs. It would take away the certainty and the guarantee of Medicare. It would reopen the gap in prescription drug coverage. For millions of people across Michigan and across America, you don't need to make health care harder. It needs to be easier.

In addition to comments from the Speaker of the House about changing Medicare and making it a priority in the budget, creating payoffs in the system, taking away the universal guarantee, we now have the President-elect nominating Dr. TOM PRICE, a current House Member, for Secretary of Health and Human Services, who has supported that budget privatizing Medicare, block granting, and cutting Medicaid and long-term care for seniors in nursing homes and so on. We are told by the nominee that he expects Republicans in Congress to move quickly on this legislation in the new year, even though President-Elect Donald Trump promised throughout his campaign that Medicare would be safe on his watch. He made that promise to the people I represent—the people we all represent—and I can assure you, I am going to be doing everything possible to make sure that promise is kept.

The only thing gutting Medicare is going to do is create chaos for tens of millions of seniors, people with disabilities, and for the health care system in general. Seniors and people with disabilities—all Americans—deserve better than this. As we enter the new year, Democrats will fight tooth and nail to protect Medicare, to make sure Medicaid and long-term care is available for our seniors, to make sure the health care guarantee that has been there for a generation of retirees and people with disabilities is continued. Medicare is a great American success story, and we are ready to do everything possible to protect it and strengthen it as a guarantee for Americans in the future.

Thank you, Mr. President.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Florida.

DREAMERS

Mr. NELSON. Mr. President, I want to speak about DREAMers. These are children who are brought to this country in an illegal status because they are brought by their parents who are undocumented. These children often do not know that in fact they are undocumented.

There are threats in the new administration to completely reverse President Obama's Executive order that allows these children to stay in the United States and continue their education. I want to tell you about one such DREAMer. This is Elisha Dawkins. Elisha came from the Bahamas in an undocumented status with his mother at the age of 6 months. Elisha's mother was deported shortly thereafter, and he was raised by family in Florida.

He always thought he was an American citizen. After high school, he joined the Army. This photo shows when he served a tour in Iraq. He came back and was mustered out of the Army with an honorable discharge after having been awarded the Iraqi Service Medal. He was assigned to a very sensitive position as a photographer.

Promptly after coming back and starting his studies, he decided to join the Navy Reserves and was given a top secret clearance. He performed photography at a very sensitive location, Guantanamo, with all of the detainees.

So Elisha, coming off his Reserve duty, resumed his studies at the University of North Florida. At one point, he had started to fill out a passport application but did not go through with that application and never turned it in. Later on, filling out a passport application, he was asked if he had ever applied for a passport and he checked the box “no” because he hadn't. The U.S. attorney's office came in and arrested him, threw him in the clink, and in the process, found out he was undocumented because of the circumstances I just told you. A veteran of Iraq and Guantanamo—Army in Iraq, Navy in Guantanamo—is in a detention center awaiting trial.

Fortunately, Elisha Dawkins' situation came to my attention and I started raising some Cain about this. As a matter of fact, in a further hearing in front of a Federal judge, the Federal judge, in essence, dressed down in court the assistant U.S. attorney who had pursued this case and, fortunately, the charges were dropped. That enabled Elisha to go on and to continue his studies. In the process, since he had no conviction, he was allowed to apply for U.S. citizenship. His military service justified him to do that. This past week, he is now graduating from the University of North Florida.

Because a child came here in an undocumented status through no fault of their own, it is not right that children, such as Elisha Dawkins, who grow up to be great assets for the United States would be penalized and threatened with deportation.

Obviously, we have to attend to the national security implications, in his case of potential passport fraud, which was not the case, but this was a man who had not committed that fraud and who had served his country honorably.

As this case has resolved itself into a happy ending, just think of all the other stories of DREAMers who are out there and who share Elisha's commitment to and love of country, commitment to the ideals that all these DREAMers share of growing up in the only country they have ever known, and they had always thought they were a member of that country.

I have said it before, and I will say it again. The DREAMers are our neighbors, they are our friends, they are our high school valedictorians, and they are our veterans.

They were brought to this country before they even knew of the significance of their trip, and they have benefited our communities greatly. It is clear that America is stronger for a person like Elisha Dawkins.

As this Congress comes to a close, I remind all of us and urge us to remember—next year, when there is an attempt to turn around that White House Executive order, I want us to remember the faces of people such as Elisha Dawkins. I want us to come together and acknowledge their many contributions to this great country.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. ERNST). The Senator from Oregon.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT NOMINATION

Mr. MERKLEY. Madam President, colleagues, we are now 4 weeks out from a Presidential election in which millions of American voters indicated they wanted a change.

Donald Trump, our President-elect, campaigned and was elected on a platform he called draining the swamp. Getting rid of entrenched special interests sounds good. Fighting on behalf of middle-class Americans sounds good. Taking on Wall Street's powerful special interests sounds good.

In fact, month after month, our President-elect attacked Secretary Clinton, saying she was too close to the Wall Street banks. He said things such as "Hillary will never reform Wall Street." He said, "I know the guys at Goldman Sachs. They have total control" over his opponent.

These are pretty harsh words. With months of hammering Wall Street and hammering his opponent, it came as a big surprise to many last week, when President-Elect Trump announced that he would be naming Steve Mnuchin, a darling of Wall Street, a 17-year veteran of Goldman Sachs, a career in the financial industry, to run the Treasury Department—the single most important post in our economy to be run by Wall Street.

Instead of draining the swamp in Washington, it looks as if our President-elect is turning our government intended to be of, by, and for the people into a government of, by, and for Wall

Street. Appointing a 17-year Goldman Sachs executive to oversee financial regulation is the definition of the fox guarding the hen house. It has the potential to undo all the progress and recovery we have made since shutting down the Wall Street casino, which dragged our country into the Great Recession. Furthermore, wouldn't it be great to have someone at the helm of our economy who fought to put people into homes, instead of fighting to kick people out of their homes and onto the street, as he has done.

One of the great things about America is the resiliency of the American people. They come upon a challenge, sometimes a catastrophe, and they work to put the pieces back together again. We have made our way through the Great Depression. We made it through two world wars, we made it through the September 11 terrorist attacks, and we have worked to recover from the Great Recession.

That crisis saw 8.7 million jobs lost, trillions of dollars of lost family wealth, and more than 2 million businesses shuttered. It was a financial crisis that cost about 4 million Americans their homes. It wiped out the hard-earned retirement savings of millions more families.

The American people are working to rebuild, but they haven't forgotten. They haven't forgotten foreclosed homes. They haven't forgotten the lost jobs. They haven't forgotten the retirement savings. They haven't forgotten the shuttered businesses across our great land, and they definitely haven't forgotten the recklessness of Wall Street that made it all happen.

It seems that perhaps President-Elect Donald Trump has already forgotten not just the driving force behind the Great Recession of 2008 that caused these calamities for millions of American families and businesses, but he has also forgotten his campaign vow to take on Wall Street. Instead, Mr. Trump is planning to put Wall Street in charge of the Treasury Department—again, the most powerful economic position in the United States of America.

Where does Wall Street stand on these issues? Wall Street hates the provisions that Congress adopted to end predatory lending practices in mortgages and consumer laws. They hate those provisions, and they want to get rid of them. They want to get rid of the watchdog that makes sure those provisions don't return. Wall Street hates the provisions that we adopted to shut down the Wall Street casino, where Wall Street firms made huge bets with the deposits of American savers to terrible consequences.

Bloomberg News reported that Trump's nominee, Steve Mnuchin, was front and center during these operations of the Wall Street casino. Have no doubt that he plans to do what he can to restore that casino. While being interviewed right after his nomination, he promised to "strip back parts of

Dodd-Frank" and went on to suggest that the Volcker rule, which is the provision that shut down the Wall Street casino, should be weakened or eliminated. It is not speculation; it is straight from his own testimony to the American public, after he was nominated, that he wants to restore the Wall Street casino.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is another target. That protection bureau is a watchdog on the beat against predatory financial practices. It is a pretty good thing when you have an organization that has returned nearly \$12 billion to 27 million American citizens harmed by illegal and predatory practices in the lending business. Furthermore, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has saved far more by preventing these practices in the first place on current lending—\$12 billion returned, but who knows how much they saved consumers on the front end. Maybe it is \$50 billion, maybe it is \$100 billion, maybe it is more. But the fact is, our citizens are getting a better foundation for our financial success.

If you believe in the success of American families, you want to block predatory practices designed to undermine them. That is what we did in Congress, and that is what is at risk.

We did a lot of powerful things to rectify the excesses that led to the disaster of 2008 under the Bush administration. We created stress tests to ensure the strength and security of our largest banks—that they had sufficient reserves to withstand periods of economic challenge. That makes sense. We put procedures in place to unwind megacorporations when they fail so they can be unwound and not take the rest of the economy, the financial system, down with them. That makes sense.

We established a cop on the beat to make sure people aren't scammed by credit card companies. It makes sense. We made sure we had an organization to which people could appeal when they thought there was a predatory practice, to have it rectified and have the funds returned to them if they were right. That makes sense. All of this makes sense. It makes what type of sense? It makes common sense.

Isn't it just common understanding that when a predator damages a family, our entire community suffers and when a family loses its home, our entire community suffers? Don't we understand that when people are thrown out into the street—as Steve Mnuchin's banks specialized in—the families are hurt, the children are deeply hurt? But now we have a nominee who specialized in Wall Street and specialized in foreclosures. I say again, wouldn't it be great to have a nominee to head our economy who worked to put people into homes, who worked to make families successful, not someone who specialized in throwing them out of their homes and onto the street?

In 2009, in the depths of the financial crisis, Steve Mnuchin purchased the

fourth largest failed bank, IndyMac, when it collapsed in July of 2008. After buying IndyMac, he renamed it OneWest and took over as the CEO.

Under Mnuchin's leadership, OneWest became what housing advocates in California called a foreclosure machine. Why did they call it a foreclosure machine? Because in the midst of the Great Recession, it pushed forward 36,000 homeowners into foreclosure, using tactics that were certainly off limits, such as robo-signing, fake signing—let me put it directly, fake signing of documents. His bank was responsible for more than one-third of all reverse mortgage foreclosures, which disproportionately were targeted at America's seniors.

Let me tell you the story of Ossie Lofton. Ossie Lofton, a 90-year-old woman from Lakeland, FL, took out a reverse mortgage on her home. This is a type of loan that allows an elderly individual to draw up the equity of their home to help them meet their basic monthly expenses. The beauty of this is that once you have that reverse mortgage, assuming it is not designed with predatory features, it can supply to a senior some steady supply, and they don't have to write a steady mortgage check to anyone. Instead, they get income to help meet those basic expenses, so it is hard to imagine how you would end in default in this situation. But individuals are still responsible for paying property taxes and homeowners insurance.

In Ossie Lofton's case, there was confusion over her homeowners insurance coverage. The bank sent her a bill for \$423.30. Ossie looked at that. She thought she had it right, and so she sent the insurance company a check for \$423, overlooking the 30-cent payment.

Well, they sent her back another bill for 30 cents. Again, she misread it. She thought they were asking for 3 cents, and she mailed them 3 cents—27 cents shy.

What did OneWest do under Steve Mnuchin's leadership? They foreclosed on Ossie for 27 cents.

In my hand I have 30 cents, a dime and four nickels. Why would a bank foreclose on a woman who owed them a few cents? Why would they do that?

Well, if you followed these predatory practices, some banks looked at it this way. They said if we can find a technicality to grab someone's home, we can resell it for far more than we are owed. That is a huge profit.

So for that 27 cents, she lost her home. She and thousands of others lost their homes so this bank could profit rather than work out a mortgage modification. That is really a crime against an American citizen, a specialty of this bank, a specialty through which Steve Mnuchin profited millions and millions of dollars. Millions of dollars of income was accumulated based on the suffering inflicted on thousands and thousands of American homeowners.

We could look at another story. Leslie Parks took out a subprime adjust-

able rate mortgage to pay for repairs. She faced some hard times and was falling behind, but under very constructive negotiations with One West to stay in the home, you will recall we had this program called the Home Affordable Mortgage Program—the HAMP program—wherein a bank could rework it. They were saying to her that we are reworking it, all is good, but, meanwhile, they were pursuing foreclosure. The result was, thinking she was working out a modification, she came back to her home in the middle of a blizzard and found herself locked out.

This is an example of the widely publicized two-track policy in which banks would pretend to work out a modification while aggressively pursuing foreclosure. That is not a good practice. It is not fair to the homeowner.

Let's look at another story. Gregg and Diane Horoski. They refinanced in 2004. They paid off their original mortgage with a loan from Deutsche Bank and used the rest of the money to cover health care costs, but it is one of those loans with an exploding interest rate, and the loan interest soared to 12.375 percent. Then Gregg Horoski started having health problems so they were having trouble keeping up with those high interest payments. So they asked the bank to work with them. What bank? One West. They asked One West to work with them to modify the loan, but the bank turned them down, misled them about how much they owed, lied to them about how much was at stake.

The Horoskis felt betrayed by the misrepresentations and they took One West to court and Judge Jeffrey Spinner said the following about the bank's behavior. Which bank? One West, the bank that Steve Mnuchin was heading. He called the bank's behavior "harsh, repugnant, shocking and repulsive." He also added, "unequitable, unconscionable, vexatious and opprobrious." He pretty much summoned every word in the English dictionary to say how wrong the bank's action was as they dealt with this couple.

Now, the bank lost that case, but they were aggressively pursuing everything so they took it to appeal. They spent a lot of money and had a lot of lawyers take on this couple and eventually the bank won. They won no grace period, no compromise, no home for this couple. The bank won and the Horoskis lost, as did thousands and thousands and thousands of individuals and couples who owned homes who lost them to these very aggressive foreclosure strategies.

That is not all. Mr. Mnuchin and his bank didn't just prey on hard-working Americans, they also had an operation that has a record of discriminating against minority home buyers and minority neighborhoods. Fair housing applicants have filed legal complaint after legal complaint against their practices.

Here is an example. According to the California Reinvestment Coalition and

Fair Housing Advocates of Northern California, the bank's Southern California branches made a total of only two mortgage loans to African-American home buyers during 2014 and 2015. That is one per year; two loans over 24 months in one of the country's most diverse communities—a community that includes Los Angeles, where African Americans make up more than 9 percent of the population. This practice is known as redlining. It is an egregious practice. What is more, of the 35,877 homes that One West foreclosed on just in California between April 2009 and April 2015, 68 percent were majority non-White areas.

Looking at this record, it is pretty clear that Mnuchin has not used his skills in life to put people into homes; he has used his skills to kick people out of their homes and into the street.

Instead of fighting for homeowners, he has made a living—the life of a mega-multimillionaire—off the suffering of low-income and middle-income Americans.

Our President-elect bashed his opponent for being too cozy with Wall Street banks. He told Iowans: "I am not going to let Wall Street get away with murder," but then he nominates an individual with this record of predatory practices, of private profit over the suffering of thousands of families, to lead our economy in the years ahead. This is just 4 weeks after his election, just 4 weeks after we heard the cries that he would stand up to Wall Street, and now he is putting Wall Street in charge.

There is more. He is not appointing just one but two former Goldman Sachs executives to key positions of power and influence. One is Steve Bannon, assigned to be his Chief Strategist. That is right—Goldman Sachs—Chief Strategist for our President-Elect. Now we have an economist in chief, the Treasury Secretary, also coming from the same direction. It sounds like instead of "draining the swamp," our President-elect is helping Wall Street restore the predatory practices that destroyed the living and the lives of millions of American homeowners. This is wrong.

I call on President-Elect Trump to reverse course, to fight for government of, by, and for the people—not government of, by, and for Wall Street.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Dakota.

CONGRESSIONAL PRIORITIES

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, the business of the 114th Congress is drawing to a close to wrap up a few final bills. One of the most important bills that we will be passing this week is the National Defense Authorization Act. In fact, this is one of the most important bills that we pass each year.

The National Defense Authorization Act is one of two bills that ensures that our military men and women have the tools and resources they need to defend our country. It is the bill that

authorizes funding for the body armor our troops wear and the weapons they carry into battle. It is the bill that authorizes funding for the advanced technology our military needs to be successful on today's battlefield and the bill that authorizes true pay increases which help us retain an All-Volunteer Force. Making sure our troops have what they need to defend our country is pretty much our most important responsibility as Members of Congress; first, of course, because the security of our country depends on it and, second, because we owe our men and women in uniform nothing less.

This year's National Defense Authorization Act authorizes the largest troop pay increase in 6 years. It modernizes the military health care system to improve quality of care for our troops and their families. It reduces Pentagon bureaucracy to focus resources on our Nation's warfighters, and it supports our allies amid growing threats.

It also addresses the dangerous underfunding of the military that has occurred under President Obama. It stops troop reductions for the Army and Marine Corps and authorizes additional funds to address readiness shortfalls.

Members of our military should not have to be salvaging spare parts from retired aircraft to keep their planes in the air. Over the next few years, the Republican majorities in Congress will work with President-Elect Trump to rebuild our Nation's military and ensure that we have the strongest fighting force in the world.

This bill is an important start.

As we finish the work of the 114th Congress, we are also looking forward to the 115th. Republicans will move quickly to take up a number of important measures. Two big issues it will tackle right at the beginning are repealing ObamaCare and confirming a Supreme Court nominee.

I don't need to tell anyone that ObamaCare is a failure. A Gallup poll released last week found that 80 percent of Americans want major changes to ObamaCare or want the law repealed and replaced. That shouldn't come as any surprise.

The President promised lower premiums and affordable care, but ObamaCare has meant exactly the opposite. Premium costs have soared and soared again. Deductibles have increased, and health care choices have been sharply reduced.

One constituent contacted me and said:

My ObamaCare premium went up from \$1,080 per month to \$1,775 per month, a 64-percent increase. That is \$21,300 a year for health insurance.

Another constituent wrote to say: "My ObamaCare premium doubles next year." It will double. I don't know too many Americans who can afford to have their health insurance premiums double.

Still another constituent wrote to tell me that "today I received a new

premium notice for my ObamaCare insurance. My policy rate for myself, my wife, and my teenage son has increased by 357 percent"—357 percent.

ObamaCare is on the brink of collapse. We know what millions of Americans already know; that is, that the status quo is unsustainable. It is time to repeal this law and replace it with something that works, and that is precisely what we are going to do.

We are going to get started on repeal as soon as the 115th Congress convenes, and then we are going to work step-by-step to replace ObamaCare with real health care reform—health care reform that focuses on the States rather than having the Federal Government running everything, health care that gives more control to patients and doctors when it comes to health care choices and decisions, health care that provides choices and is patient-centered so there are more options out there, more choices, more competition in the marketplace, and a health care system that allows flexibility for our small businesses on which much of the responsibility for providing health care for their employees falls.

Another thing we are going to get started on right away in January is confirming the President's nominees, including his nominee for the Supreme Court. My Democratic colleagues have spent a lot of time talking about the importance of confirming a ninth Justice to the Supreme Court. I trust they will bring that same eagerness with them in January. I look forward to working with them during the confirmation process.

After Justice Scalia's death, I came to the floor to honor him. Like others who spoke at the time, I mentioned his keen mind, his gift for language and, most of all, his absolute commitment to the law. For Justice Scalia, the Constitution truly was the supreme law of the land. He didn't let anything interfere with that. His politics, his personal opinions, his feelings about a case, none of those things were allowed to play a role in his decisions. That is the key right there.

We all know Justice Scalia had personal opinions, but when it came down to deciding cases, he ignored them. He looked at the law and the Constitution, which is the supreme law, and he judged accordingly.

It is wonderful to have strong opinions. It is wonderful to have sympathy for causes or organizations. It is wonderful to have plans for fixing society's problems, but none of those things have any business influencing your ruling when you sit on the Supreme Court. There only two things that should influence a Supreme Court Justice's ruling: the law and the Constitution. The minute something else comes into play, whether it is a Justice's personal feelings or a political philosophy, you have done away with the rule of law and replaced it with the rule of personal opinion. We have gone through a lot in this country to ensure

that we will be governed by the law and not by someone's personal opinions.

Justice Scalia will be a hard Justice to replace, but I am confident that President-Elect Trump will nominate a Justice with a similar respect for the rule of law, and I look forward to working with my colleagues to get a qualified nominee confirmed.

Repealing ObamaCare and confirming a Supreme Court nominee are two important things we are going to do next year, but they are just the beginning. Republicans are going to spend the 115th Congress fighting for the American people's priorities, from growing our economy and creating better paying jobs to securing our borders and protecting our Nation. We have a chance to do big things for the American people in 2017, and we can't wait to get started.

Madam President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BROWN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MINE WORKER HEALTH CARE BENEFITS AND PENSIONS

Mr. BROWN. Madam President, it strikes me as pretty unbelievable that we are in the process of voting—debating a continuing resolution, and yet nobody has read it and nobody understands what is in it. We hear news reports, but nobody who I know here—at least on our side—has been in the negotiations even though we have a Democratic President and the Senate is 45, 46 percent Democrats, even though more people voted for Democratic Senators than Republican Senators in this election and most of the last several elections. Even with all that, that shouldn't matter, but Senator MCCONNELL and the Republican leadership are asking us to vote on something this complicated with this many add-on amendments that we have not even read yet. What kind of way to run the Senate is that? We do know, though, from the reports I can get, what they have told us is that Majority Leader MCCONNELL's response to the mine workers has been pretty pathetic.

Today I met with Senator HATCH in his office. Today I met with Senator WYDEN in his office. One of the things we did in the Finance Committee on an overwhelmingly bipartisan basis, joined by my Republican colleague from Ohio, Senator PORTMAN, and other coal State Democrats and Republicans—Senator CAPITO, Senator MANCHIN, Senator WARNER, Senator KAINE, Senator CASEY, Senator TOOMEY—all of us in this committee supported a bipartisan fix for mine worker pensions and health care. Yet the continuing resolution at best—at best, we understand; again, we haven't

read it yet because they won't show it to us yet even though they want us to vote on it—at best, it has some 4 months of health care and nothing for pensions.

This is not a taxpayer bailout; this is moving money—unused money—from the abandoned mine fund in to fund the pensions and health care for mine workers and mine worker widows. Keep in mind—I know the Presiding Officer doesn't represent coal States. She may not know a lot of miners, as I and some of my colleagues do, but she knows about mining. Understand, there are more miner widows than there are likely to be insurance salesmen widows or realtor widowers or whatever. Mine-working is a dangerous job. Mine workers too often get injured and killed on the job. Their lives are shortened from injury. Their lives are shortened from illnesses, black lung and other illnesses. So mine workers who marry at 20 or 25 are likely—their spouses are likely to outlive them by a number of years. That is the other reason we should do this.

The third reason we should do this is that almost 70 years ago, President Truman made a commitment that we have lived up to until now. The reason we aren't living up to it now is because the majority leader of the Senate said no. I don't know exactly why he said no. I know he is not a big fan of the United Mine Workers union. I support the United Mine Workers union. I care about unions. I know unions helped create the middle class in this country. But that is not the point. My caring about this is—there are 12,000 mine workers in my part of the country, more than 1,000 in Ohio, for which this will be a very, very bad Christmas because they have already gotten notice, as Senator MANCHIN said, that their health care is going to be cut off. If we do a 4-month fix, then they will get another notice in January that their health care is going to get cut off. How do you treat people that way? I mean, we dress well. We are all well paid. We have good health care. We have good pensions. We are telling these mine workers: Yeah, you may have earned this under the old rules, but, sorry, we can't take care of you.

My friends over there could bail out the banks—that is OK—and then banker compensation keeps going up and up, but they can't take care of mine workers with a relatively small pension and health care. They can't take care of them.

We passed a bipartisan mine worker pension and health care bill. We passed it out of committee. We did it the way Senator McCONNELL, the majority leader, wanted us to. We went through the process. Now he is not willing to honor that. It is pretty outrageous. At the same time, they are doing something special in this bill for Wyoming. Nothing against Wyoming. I like Senator ENZI. I like Senator BARRASSO. I want to help them help their State. But this is a part of the country. It is

Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia. These are States that have thousands of mine workers, and this Senate is betraying them. If my colleagues think we should go home for Christmas starting next week without doing this, that is morally reprehensible.

Senator MANCHIN and I were talking today and Senator CASEY and Senator Kaine and Senator WARREN and I were talking today about how we are willing to stay until Christmas, we are willing to stay until December 25—literally, to Christmas—to get this done because it is morally reprehensible and it is outrageous that we would leave here without taking care of these mine workers.

I know some of them. I know Norm Skinner. I know Dave Dilley. I have known Babe Erdos for 35 years. These are people who worked very hard in the mines under dangerous conditions. They are the reason we are able to have so much manufacturing in Ohio. The coal they mine helps to produce the electricity that makes our standard of living so much higher than it would be without it.

I spoke at the rally. Thousands of mine workers were here late this summer—I think in July. I am not sure what month it was; maybe in September they were here. It was a very hot day. I remember the president of the International Mine Workers, Cecil Roberts, asked the question: How many of you are veterans? A huge number of people waved their hands. They were all standing at this rally. How many of you had fathers or mothers who were veterans? It seemed as if it was the whole crowd. These are people who served their country, they make our communities work, and we are going to betray them, we are going to forget them because one Senator, who happens to be the majority leader, for whatever reason doesn't like the United Mine Workers. That is fundamentally what it is. I don't ever want to embarrass anybody, I don't want to call people out, but there are 12,000 mine workers who are going to have a bad Christmas. Their lives will be shortened if we don't take care of them. The stress they are under—they have already gotten one notification. If we do this for another 4 months, they will get another notification in January saying: Sorry, I know we gave you health care again for a while, but we are cutting it off again because Congress can't get its act together.

The President wants to do this. Even the House of Representatives wants to do it—the House of Representatives that took out of a bill this week “Buy American” provisions for steel and aluminum. That is a whole other issue; I don't understand why they would do that. The fact is, the House did it, the President wants to do it, and a strong majority of the Finance Committee wants to do it. If we brought this to a vote on the Senate floor, there is no question it would pass. It doesn't cost the taxpayer money. It is not a bailout.

It is honoring a pledge that Harry Truman made, that we made in the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s and 1980s and 1990s and 2000, and all of a sudden we are not honoring that pledge. It is outrageous. We can fix this. We know how the Senate should do it.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BLUNT. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL

Mr. BLUNT. Madam President, as we send troops into harm's way—and as you personally well know—it is our job to ensure that they have the tools and the resources they need to carry out the mission they are asked to carry out. We never want Americans to be involved in a fair fight. We always want them to be involved in an unfair fight where they have every possible advantage. It doesn't always work out that way, but it should always be our goal. That is what the Defense authorization bill is designed to do.

This will be the 55th consecutive year that the Congress has passed and the Senate has passed the National Defense Authorization Act. The leadership of Chairman McCain and Ranking Member Jack Reed makes it possible for us to be here one more time, emphasizing that the No. 1 priority of the Federal Government is to defend the country. It is hard to find a bill that we pass every year for more than half a century, but this critical piece of legislation provides the vision and the authorization necessary for the military to move forward and to do that No. 1 job of defending America.

There has been—and I think today we will see that again in the vote on this bill—the strong, bipartisan support that this bill always receives. Although there is sometimes a discussion about when it should be passed, we have not failed to pass it in a long time. It includes a lot of provisions that I think will make a big difference. One is a pay raise for our troops, which they deserve. It is the largest pay increase in the last 6 years, and it begins to fulfill our commitment to those who currently serve. As well, we need to fulfill our commitment to those who have served.

I am also glad that there is a vital project for the Nation that happens to be located in my State, in St. Louis, MO. The final version of this bill includes authorization for the land acquisition for the National Geospatial movement from the south part of St. Louis, where it has been for seven decades, to a new location that allows them to build a facility, as it is right now, that is fully backing up the only other facility in the world that does the level of geospatial work that this one does. When something happens in

Springfield, VA, where that location isn't monitoring the world as it usually does, all of that work goes to St. Louis, where on every other day they share the responsibility for geospatial.

There is a provision in here, at a fundamental level of safety, to build a fire station at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. Everything from building a fire station to creating a \$1.7 billion facility that allows us to further keep an eye on the world as we do now is a good thing. It also addresses the issue that was raised earlier this year concerning members of the National Guard—men and women who were given a bonus and then wrongfully asked to return that bonus. It was not their error. That money in most families long ago has been spent. It was thought to be appropriately handed over to them, and they shouldn't be penalized because other people made a mistake when that distribution was made. With this bill, they will not be penalized.

I think there is an increase here in end strength. It is in the conference report. I certainly supported Senator MORAN's efforts on this issue and commend him for the hard work he put forward to be sure that we don't lose any more ground on the strength we have and the ability we have to be ready. Making down payments on our readiness issues, stabilizing our force at a time when we really face more challenges around the world—not less—was a minimum thing for us to do, but the bill does that. Senator MORAN's leadership was important in accomplishing that as well.

Once again, this bill puts Congress on record against the President's plan to move terrorist detainees held at Guantanamo Bay to any location on U.S. soil. I, along with a majority of Americans, oppose the idea that we bring these terrorists here. The President made a campaign pledge a decade ago now, and 10 years later, not only has that campaign pledge not been able to be fulfilled but the Congress once again today asserts our view that it should not be fulfilled.

The administration admitted earlier this year that Americans have been killed by terrorists released from Guantanamo, and they made that admission, by the way, days before they approved another dozen inmates to transfer somewhere else in the world, where I don't think they can be kept count of and track of like they need to be. We don't need to close this facility. We don't need to abandon the facility, and I am glad that there are strict prohibitions here that don't allow that to happen.

This bill also makes important steps toward enhancing the quality of life for our servicemembers and their families. GEN Ray Odierno, recently retired, Chief of Staff of the Army, said that the strength of the military is in military families, and we need to do a better job recognizing that. I hope we are able to advance an effort that was in the Senate bill that didn't get into the

final bill—the Military Family Stability Act—next year. This is an action that will allow military families to stay longer at a location or to move earlier than the individual in the military does if there is a professional reason or an educational reason for that to happen.

The investment that military families have made in the country and the investment they have made in what the person serving has learned in a very complicated defense world don't need to be unnecessarily complicated by whether someone gets to finish a year in elementary school or gets to stay another 3 months so they can graduate from high school, particularly if the person in the military is willing to go on ahead and bear their own expense until the family, with the family assistance that families get or the living assistance, moves later.

This was determined by everybody that looked at it, except the Pentagon, to have no cost. I asked every senior officer who came before the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee about this concept of making it a little easier for people to stay, for a spouse who needed to go ahead and move a little early to start that teaching year at a new school, to get a job that was available at a hospital, or to do whatever that spouse could do to continue to have their professional career. I asked officer after officer: What do you think about this?

One after another, they all said: This is exactly the kind of investment we need to make. We didn't quite get there in this bill, and I am grateful that Senator MCCAIN has pledged to work further to study why the Pentagon itself—or at least the Department of Defense at the highest levels—is the only place that thinks this would cost anything or would be too much trouble. It wouldn't be too much trouble. I hope to see it in the bill next year.

Someone who has really helped in my ability to look at this bill, with the work that I do as a member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee and with the work that we do with great military facilities in our State, is here on the floor today, MAJ Andy Anderson. He has been a great resource to our office, and we have benefited for some time now of having military fellows come in and spend a year with us. I continue to hear from them that it is also a great benefit to them to see how this part of the process of preparing to do what is necessary to help them defend the country works.

The knowledge and experience that Major Anderson has gained as an Army officer helped in discussions we had both in the State and in the Nation. I have been particularly appreciative of his willingness to go beyond what might be considered the typical duties of a military fellow in a Senate office. For instance, he has taken personal interest and has been instrumental in assisting a Missouri family in getting their father's remains returned home

from Laos after having been shot down over Laos during the Vietnam war. He has devoted a lot of time to gathering and analyzing data on legislative history and actions that will continue to be critical to the office moving forward. I want to also thank his family and wish him the best as he and his wife Audra and their sons Reid and Joel go to what military assignment they have next.

This bill renews the Iran Sanctions Act, and the Iran Sanctions Act would have expired at the end of the year. I am hopeful that the administration understands that this act is really a foundational element of the regime that they entered into. It was an agreement that I didn't support. I still don't support it, but extending the Iran Sanctions Act is perfectly consistent with what the Iran nuclear agreement purports to do. If the Iran Sanctions Act is a problem, the Iran nuclear agreement is just as bad as I thought it was.

When that agreement was completed, the administration repeatedly promised that U.S. sanctions on Iran for its support of terrorism would remain in place under the agreement. For example, the day the agreement was announced, President Obama himself said that we will maintain our own sanctions related to Iran's support of terrorism.

The administration continues to recognize the Iranian state as the leading state sponsor of terrorism. This Iran Sanctions Act extension sends another message to Iran that the Congress and the country of the United States are paying attention. It gives the next administration a powerful tool to hold Iran responsible, and I certainly urge the President to sign this bill. I urge my colleagues to vote for it.

In conclusion, once again, for 55 years in a row, the Congress of the United States is going to make the point that the No. 1 obligation of the Federal Government is to defend the country, and this bill helps to allow that to happen.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SANDERS. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. SANDERS. Madam President, I rise in strong opposition to this legislation, the so-called 21st Century Cures Act. While I appreciate the work Senator MURRAY, Senator ALEXANDER, and others have done on this legislation, I cannot in good conscience vote on it in its current form.

It goes without saying that everybody, whether Republican, Democrat, or Independent, wants to find cures to the terrible diseases that are impacting the lives of millions of people, such as cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes, and the

terrible illnesses that strike children. We all want to find cures for those illnesses, but that is not really what this debate is about. The debate we are having on this bill is simple: Do we continue to cave in to the demands of the pharmaceutical industry—an industry that is making recordbreaking profits by charging the American people, by far, the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs—or do we have the courage to stand up to the CEOs of big drug companies whose prices are so high that one out of five Americans who gets a prescription from a doctor is unable to afford to fill that prescription? Let's be clear. If you cannot afford to fill that prescription, you will likely get sicker, and in some cases, you are going to die.

It is incomprehensible to me that we have a major bill dealing with prescription drugs, and yet we are running away from the most important issue that impacts millions of people and that the American people feel very strongly about, and that is the greed of the pharmaceutical industry and the outrageously high prices our people are being forced to pay. That is the issue on which we must focus.

If we were really serious about finding cures for life-threatening illnesses and diseases, maybe—just maybe—we would adequately fund the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration. Over the last 12 years, medical research has been cut by over 20 percent after adjusting for inflation. Even if this bill passes, funding for NIH will still be roughly \$7 billion less this year than what it was in 2004. Meanwhile, over the same time period—just to put this in context—the top 1 percent has received over \$1 trillion in tax breaks. In other words, we cannot fund the agencies that are trying to find cures for diseases, but we can give unbelievably significant tax breaks to the 1 percent.

Let me very briefly give a few major reasons this bill should be defeated.

No. 1, as I said a moment ago, the most important prescription drug-related crisis facing our country right now is the skyrocketing price of prescription drugs. This bill does not even deal with that issue. How can we talk about a bill dealing with the pharmaceutical industry without addressing the elephant in the room, which is the fact that we pay the highest prices in the world for medicine? And in many cases, those costs are soaring.

In America today, one out of five people between the ages of 19 and 64 cannot afford to fill their prescriptions. Hundreds of thousands of seniors are forced to cut their pills in half because the medicine they need is just too expensive. Let me give just a few examples.

Since 2007, Mylan has raised the price of a package of EpiPens by 461 percent while rewarding its CEO with a 671-percent increase in compensation. Maybe, just maybe, we might want to address that issue.

Last year, Turing Pharmaceuticals increased the price of Daraprim by 5,000 percent overnight. It went from \$13.50 to \$750 for just one pill.

While thousands of children in Flint have been poisoned by lead, Valeant increased the price of the drug to treat this disease 2,700 percent in a single year—from \$7,100 to about \$27,000.

Meanwhile, at a time when 35 million Americans cannot afford the medicine they need, the drug companies are making enormous profits and providing extremely generous compensation packages to their executives. Last year, fellow Americans, while you were paying more and more for prescription drugs you desperately needed, the 5 major drug companies made over \$50 billion in profit—\$50 billion in profit, 5 drug companies—while the top 10 pharmaceutical executives received over \$320 million in compensation. In fact, the prescription drug companies literally have money to burn. This year, the pharmaceutical industry spent \$131 million to defeat Proposition 61, a ballot initiative in California that would have lowered average drug prices by at least 24 percent for millions of people. They spent \$131 million in California to defeat a proposal that would have lowered drug prices.

How does it happen that the pharmaceutical companies can charge any price they want for prescription drugs? The answer is clear: The prescription drug industry, along with Wall Street, is the most powerful political force in America. I have been fighting the greed of the prescription drug industry for decades, and as far as I can tell, the pharmaceutical industry always win. They never lose. They win, but the American people lose.

Since 1998, the pharmaceutical industry has spent more than \$3 billion in lobbying all over this place. There are hundreds and hundreds of lobbyists telling Members of Congress what the pharmaceutical industry wants, and they have made hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign contributions. They currently have over 1,200 lobbyists on their payrolls here in Washington, including former leaders of the Democratic and Republican Parties. That is why the pharmaceutical industry makes huge profits while the American people cannot afford the medicine they need.

It would be one thing if these outrageous price increases were happening in other major countries. Are these price increases taking place all over the world? The answer is, they are not. In 2013, we spent nearly 40 percent more per person on prescription drugs than Canada and five times as much as in Denmark. How is it that the cost of prescription drugs in Denmark, Canada, the UK, and France is significantly lower than it is in the United States? That is an issue, and it is high time we begin discussing it. For example, it costs \$730 for a 90-day supply of Crestor—which is used to treat high cholesterol—in the United States but

just \$160 in Canada. Americans with heartburn pay \$736 for a 90-day supply of Nexium, but that same product costs \$214 in Canada. Americans with arthritis are forced to pay \$895 for Celebrex, but it costs just \$280 in Canada.

During this recent campaign, President-Elect Donald Trump promised, among many other things, to lower the prices of prescription drugs. That is what Mr. Trump said. He promised that he would “allow consumers access to imported, safe and dependable drugs from overseas to bring more options to consumers.” He also promised to require Medicare to negotiate with the drug companies for lower prices—something that is banned by law today.

Here is what President-Elect Trump said while on the campaign trail:

We are not allowed to negotiate drug prices. Can you believe it? We pay about \$300 billion more than we are supposed to, than if we negotiated the price. So there's \$300 billion on day one we solve.

Since President-Elect Trump supports requiring Medicare to negotiate with drug companies to lower prices, which is an idea that many people in this body also support, and since Mr. Trump believes we should be able to re-import low-cost medicines from Canada and other countries, I am quite confident that all of my Republican colleagues will support an amendment in my hands that will do exactly what Mr. Trump said he would accomplish as President. Think about what you can do to pave the way for Mr. Trump when he comes into office. You will have already satisfied one of his major campaign pledges.

Therefore, Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the pending motion to concur with an amendment be set aside, and I ask unanimous consent for the immediate consideration of a motion to concur in the House amendment to the Senate amendment to H.R. 34 with a further amendment that I send to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Missouri.

Mr. BLUNT. Madam President, reserving the right to object, one way to be sure of not getting the work done we are doing today is to add another topic. I think the work we are doing today is important.

My friend from Vermont mentioned some statistics that were right a couple of years ago about the decline in health care research money. We are not where we should be, but we are not where we were 2 years ago, either. When my side took control of the majority, I got a chance to chair the appropriating committee for Health and Human Services, and for the first time in 12 years, we had an almost 7-percent increase. The Senator is absolutely right—at that moment, we were 22 percent behind in research buying dollars from where we were 12 years earlier. But if everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. So we did what the government should do and what people want the government to do: We went

through the process of prioritizing. We eliminated 18 programs last year—zeroed them out for either being duplicative or not doing what they were designed to do—so we could prioritize exactly the important health care research this bill talks about and my friend from Vermont mentioned, a 7-percent increase last year and another 6.5-percent increase this year. Another \$2 billion came out of our committee, came out of the full appropriating committee, and has been on the desk ready for the minority to let us take up for months now. That would be an almost 14-percent increase in 2 years. Fourteen percent of the 22 percent would have been eliminated if we could have taken up the bill that I still wish we were voting on today. The bill we are voting on today does some of what that baseline increase would do.

Why do we want to increase health care research? Obviously for individuals and their families who might be able to better deal with or totally avoid a health care crisis they would otherwise have.

From the point of view of taxpayers, on Alzheimer's, which was mentioned here today, we are spending \$250 billion a year right now. The NIH projection for 2050 is that we will be spending \$1.1 trillion that year in today's dollars, which is twice the defense budget. Now, \$1.1 trillion sounds like a lot and \$250 billion sounds like a lot to me. In fact, pretty small numbers sound like a lot to me. But when I think about spending twice the defense budget on Alzheimer's alone—and that is just tax dollars, that is not what families would be spending if we don't invest in research now. It makes a big difference.

So from Alzheimer's—there is an inducement here that I would like to see be even more specific, and when we get back to the regular appropriating process, I will work to do that again. There is a prize inducement, the Beau Biden cancer research fund. There is money that could go to autism. Everything from Alzheimer's to autism benefits when we focus on health care research.

There is also money in this bill to further enhance the ability to get drugs to the marketplace quicker so that people have an opportunity that they don't currently have to work with their doctor and decide they want to try that new advancement.

This bill matters. I think in some ways it is better to let NIH—the real researchers—prioritize spending and let us prioritize research as a topic.

I think this bill should pass. I think it should pass today. I was on the House floor last week when they overwhelmingly voted for it to pass. The sure way for this bill not to pass in this Congress is to do something now that changes the subject.

I am particularly glad that my longtime friend from both the House and Senate is really interested in President Trump fulfilling his campaign pledges, and I am particularly pleased to see him agree with at least that one

pledge, but that won't happen until next year. Today's work is to pass the 21st Century Cures bill. I look forward to the vote that will do that before we leave this week.

Mr. President, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LANKFORD). Objection heard.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, two points. First of all, let me reiterate that is for inflation-adjusted dollars, not nominal dollars. The funding for the National Institutes of Health this year will still be roughly \$7 billion less than what it received in 2004. That is point No. 1.

Point No. 2—and I will yield briefly to my friend from Missouri—did I hear him say that he is supportive of reimportation and having the Federal Government—Medicare—negotiate prescription drug prices with the pharmaceutical industry? That is what I thought I heard him say.

I yield to my friend.

Mr. BLUNT. I thank my friend for yielding.

In terms of the money available for research, we have taken that 22 percent of buying power and changed it to about 15 percent. If we doubled our bill this year, we would change it from 15 to about 7 or 8 percent. We need to get back to where we were 12 years ago and then not stop in real buying power. I want to do that.

I think what I said about the overall discussion of reimportation and other things was that I was delighted to hear my friend from Vermont so supportive of the next President's program.

Mr. SANDERS. I am very supportive, he is dead right. But I was wondering if my friend—when he said we are going to get to it next year, what does that mean? Does that mean you will be pushing the ability of Americans and pharmacists and distributors to be able to benefit from unfettered free trade and buy low-cost medicines and some of the same drugs sold in Canada and the UK? And will you also, as Mr. Trump made the point, allow Medicare to negotiate for lower prices? Is that something on which we can expect our Republican friends to support the President-elect?

Mr. BLUNT. If my friend would yield, I would say we have passed this bill in the Congress—that bill—several times over the last few years. On each occasion, often with Democratic administrations, the only obstacle has been for the administration to certify that reimportation could be safely done.

Mr. SANDERS. Exactly right.

Mr. BLUNT. And none of them have ever been willing to do that.

Mr. SANDERS. My friend is exactly right. Neither a Republican nor a Democratic administration will have the guts to stand up to the pharmaceutical industry.

Today, if you have a salad, it is likely you are going to get your salad with tomatoes and lettuce that are from Mexico or some other country with very poorly inspected farms. That is no

problem, but somehow or another, we are led to believe that it is impossible to bring in brand-name medicine from Canada or the United Kingdom or France, that it just cannot be done. It is beyond belief that anybody with a straight face believes that to be true. Clearly, this is what the pharmaceutical industry wants us to believe, but I hope that my friend from Missouri will not accept what the pharmaceutical industry tells us and understands that the next Secretary of HHS should certify that with proper procedures, we can reimport medicine.

I yield to my friend.

Mr. BLUNT. I thank my friend for yielding. I would just say that if the Secretary of HHS can certify that, that is a good thing, and I voted for that in the past. But I know what a tomato looks like. I don't know what is inside a capsule, and that has always been the obstacle for the people we have asked to look at this and certify the safety.

If people can figure out how to do that so we know what is inside of that pill—the worst thing you can do health-wise is believe you are taking a pill that isn't the pill you believe you are taking.

Mr. SANDERS. I know what a tomato looks like, too, but you don't know what kind of pesticide was used or how that tomato was grown. The idea that we cannot get a product from across the border safely really doesn't pass the laugh test, frankly. This is one of the things the pharmaceutical industry has been pushing. We have unfettered free trade for fish, for vegetables, for meat from all over the world, but somehow, from Canada or the UK or France—we cannot safely bring medicine into this country at a fraction of the price our pharmacists are now paying. Frankly, I would say to the Senator from Missouri, that does not pass the laugh test, and I hope we can work together. Clearly, we want the medicine to come in safely, but I think we can do that, and I look forward to doing that.

I yield.

Mr. BLUNT. I would say that the one thing we will accomplish before the week is out is passing this bill, but I hope this bill doesn't become something that we continue to refer back to and say we have already done that. This bill is a step in the right direction, but in health care research, it does not get us to where I would like to be or where we were 12 years ago. We need the kind of research dollars that encourage young researchers to stay in the research business, the kind of research dollars that encourage them to find solutions, the kind of research dollars that ensure that every family who can avoid a crisis or be ready to deal with it in a better way is able to do that. So I look forward to the bill being passed as we finish the week.

I yield back.

Mr. SANDERS. I agree with the last statement the Senator from Missouri made.

Let me give another reason why I am opposed to this bill. Incredibly, this legislation makes it easier for prescription drug companies to get away with fraud. Fraud is something the major drug companies have been perpetuating on the American people for a number of years.

It is not widely known, but it should be known that since 1991, drug companies have paid over \$35 billion in fines or settlements for fraud and misconduct—\$35 billion—but instead of cracking down on pharmaceutical company fraud, this bill actually legalizes the fraudulent behavior of some of the big drug companies.

Specifically, under this bill, pharmaceutical companies would be allowed to promote unapproved uses of drugs to insurance companies—a practice which is currently illegal. Why would we allow the pharmaceutical industry the opportunity to market drugs to insurance companies for uses that haven't been approved by the FDA? This is a major problem. Let me give a few examples.

In 2013, the Justice Department ordered Johnson & Johnson, one of the major pharmaceutical companies in the country, to pay \$2.2 billion in fines for "recklessly promoting drugs for uses that have not been proven to be safe and effective." According to the U.S. attorney handling the case, Johnson & Johnson's "promotion of Risperdal for unapproved uses threatened the most vulnerable populations of our society: children, the elderly, and those with developmental disabilities. Congress rightfully determined that this is unacceptable and made it illegal, but under this bill, it could become legal. That is wrong.

In 2010, AstraZeneca pharmaceuticals paid \$520 million to resolve allegations that it illegally marketed the antipsychotic drug Seroquel for uses not approved as safe and effective by the FDA.

In 2009, Eli Lilly was fined over \$1.4 billion for its off-label promotion of another antipsychotic drug known as Zyprexa. According to Federal investigators, Eli Lilly's illegal activities increased patients' costs, threatened their safety, and negatively affected the delivery of health care services to over 9 million military members, retirees, and their families who rely on health care.

We need to make it harder for the pharmaceutical industry to commit fraud, but instead this bill allows the pharmaceutical industry to, in fact, commit even more fraud. That is unacceptable.

Third, let's be clear: This bill would cut Medicare and Medicaid by a billion dollars. Millions of senior citizens are in desperate need of Medicare and Medicaid.

Thanks to Medicare, today more than 48 million seniors and 9 million people with disabilities have health insurance coverage through Medicare, and over 73 million Americans are en-

rolled in Medicaid. The last thing we should be doing today is cutting Medicare and Medicaid. We need to make health care more affordable to senior citizens, the disabled, and low-income families with children—not more expensive.

Finally, this bill—and this is quite significant—cuts \$3.5 billion from the Affordable Care Act's prevention fund to prevent Alzheimer's, diabetes, suicide, heart disease, and lead poisoning.

Instead of cutting Medicare and Medicaid, instead of cutting funds for health care programs, we should be demanding that the wealthiest people in this country and the largest corporations start paying their fair share of taxes. We should not be cutting life-and-death programs for the most vulnerable people in this country.

I say to my colleagues, if you want to lower the outrageous cost of prescription drugs, vote against this bill. If you are opposed to legalizing pharmaceutical fraud that can endanger the lives of many Americans, please vote against this bill. If you are opposed to cutting Medicare and Medicaid, vote against this bill. If you want to prevent cuts to programs that would prevent Alzheimer's disease and many other diseases, vote against this bill.

It is time to stand up to the pharmaceutical industry and stand with the American people who are tired of being ripped off by this extremely greedy industry.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I come to the floor to speak about the fires and tornadoes in Tennessee, but I would observe beforehand that by tomorrow we will be voting on the 21st Century Cures and the mental health bill.

I have a little different view of it than the Senator from Vermont. For example, using the money in the prevention fund, which was a part of the Affordable Care Act, I would say is a pretty good use of it to support the President's Precision Medicine Initiative and to support the Vice President's Cancer Moonshot and to support the BRAIN Initiative at the National Institutes of Health. This is what we do in the bill, with \$1.4 billion for precision medicine, \$1.8 billion for Cancer Moonshot, and \$1.5 billion for the BRAIN Initiative. If we are interested in reducing grief and reducing spending in this country, accelerating the arrival of medicines that will identify Alzheimer's before its symptoms and other medicines that will retard the progression of Alzheimer's would be a magnificent thing to do. It would be a miracle for many families. It is not just a miracle; it is something that Dr. Francis Collins, a renowned scientist who is head of the National Institutes of Health—the "National Institutes of Hope" is what he calls it—predicts will happen in the next 10 years, along with a vaccine for Zika, a vaccine for HIV-

AIDS, a vaccine for universal flu, which killed 30,000 people last year, and advances in regenerative medicine that would put a physician like our former majority leader, Dr. Bill Frist of Nashville, out of business.

Bill Frist was at one time a heart transplant surgeon. I think he transplanted more hearts than anybody in the world—or nearly anybody. But Dr. Collins believes that with advances in using our own adult cells, we will restore hearts. We will not have to transplant them. We may be able to restore eyesight. These are the kinds of miracles this legislation will encourage that could affect nearly every American family.

The other part of the legislation, equally important to money, is that it would make reforms in the Food and Drug Administration and in the National Institutes of Health that will move research for those treatments and cures through the regulatory and investment process more rapidly, at lower costs, into the medicine cabinets, and into the doctors' offices, where they can help virtually every family in this country.

That is why 85 Senators yesterday voted to end debate on this floor, and I suspect more will vote tomorrow to send it to the President. That is why, in the House of Representatives, 392 of them voted for this bill. Only six Democratic Members of the House of Representatives voted against it. They are not persuaded that there is some evil force in there. They like what they see, and not only them. The President of the United States says that this is "an opportunity we just can't miss."

The Vice President of the United States, talking about his Cancer Moonshot, says that this is a big and important step forward.

The Republican Speaker of the House, PAUL RYAN, turned a couple of somersaults trying to figure out the way to do the funding on this because it is an important part of his own agenda for our Nation's health care future.

I have heard the majority leader of the Senate, Senator MCCONNELL, say in private meetings and in public that this is the most important piece of legislation we will pass this year.

Add to it the mental health legislation that Senator CASSIDY, Senator MURPHY, and Senator CORNYN worked so hard on over here, and you can get something we can be very proud of, which is why it received such a big vote yesterday.

I want the American people to know that is what we are doing. I think that is what they want us to do. We could do something in a partisan way, we could do something by Executive order, or we could take 2 years, as we literally did in this bill, with multiple hearings, multiple consultations, many differences of opinion, all of them resolved though in a bipartisan way, and produce a lasting result.

It will not be like ObamaCare, where the next day one party is trying to repeal it and the next party is defending

it. It will not be like some other partisan legislation. This will last. Nobody is going to be trying to repeal it because almost everybody voted for it. The money will come just as the legislation says, year after year.

I am proud of the Senate, and I am happy for the American people, and I look forward to tomorrow.

SEVIER COUNTY FIRE

Mr. President, on a more somber note, a week ago last Wednesday, on a mountaintop called the Chimney Tops in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, someone spotted a fire and called the National Park Service about 5:20pm in the afternoon. I have been up on Chimney Tops many times—more times when I was younger than when I have been older—but it is a peak with rocks at the top. We are not like the West where they have a lot of rocky mountains. We don't have many of those. We have an average of 83 inches of rainfall a year, unlike Southern California or Phoenix, places like that, where they only get a few inches of rain a year. We almost have rain forests. When the fall comes, there are lots of leaves on the ground.

But the fire started up on the Chimney Tops. I can tell you there wouldn't have been anyone within 100 miles who would have imagined that somehow the next Monday, wind would have swept that fire into Gatlinburg, TN, killing 14 people, injuring another 134, causing an evacuation of 14,000 people, wrecking lives and wrecking homes.

There have been some people wondering a little bit: Well, how could this have happened? Look, we have had fires all over East Tennessee this year. We are not used to that. It is because we have had a drought for a long time.

I have an article by Bob Hodge about Greg Ward of Sevier County. This is the county where Gatlinburg is. Greg Ward spent his 53 years roaming around the woods and waters of Sevier County, according to Bob Hodge, a writer for the Knoxville News Sentinel.

The long and short of it is, those who know the woods and the waters in East Tennessee know that this drought has been with us for a while. Trout stocking programs wouldn't work because the water was so low that the streams wouldn't handle the trout, and the water was too warm for them to survive.

In some places the creeks were flowing at 10 percent of normal. We may have seen that once before in someone's memory back in the 1970s, but for the last 3 months, there has been very little rain. According to Bob Hodge's article, we have had a drought since 2015.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD this article by Bob Hodge of the Knoxville News Sentinel following my remarks.

On Friday, Governor Haslam of Tennessee, Senator CORKER, and I went to Gatlinburg. The only thing I could think to say to the people assembled there were two things. One was that

your character is measured not so much by how you handle things when things are going well, but how you handle adversity. If that is the measure of character, the character of the people of Gatlinburg in Sevier County are through the roof because they are not complaining.

The mayor of Gatlinburg, Mike Werner, had his home burn down in 15 minutes. He was at the press conference worried about other people, not himself.

Cindy Ogle, the city manager of Gatlinburg for a long time, had her home burn down. She was there, not complaining, and worrying about the other people of Gatlinburg and Sevier County.

Mike Werner's business was also burned down. He is staying in the apartment of a friend nearby.

That story is happening over and over and over in Sevier County. There have been extraordinary gestures by people to help.

At one point, shortly after the fire started, there were 140 fire trucks from all over Tennessee and more than 400 volunteers. The fires kept going and going because this wind came up on Monday night after the fire had already started 10 miles away on the top of this rocky mountain, and a 90-mile-an-hour wind blew the fire all the way into Gatlinburg. The wind knocked down transformers and started other fires, and people were racing for their lives.

On the floor, I mentioned stories of firefighters having to get back in their trucks to get away from the bears that were running toward them escaping the fire, of people driving through fire to escape, of windshield wipers melting as they drove down the mountain. It was a terrifying experience. In the West they may be used to this. Nobody ever gets used to it, I guess, but we don't see that where we are from, typically with 83 inches of rain in a year.

I salute the people of Sevier County and Gatlinburg for their courage, their character, and their compassion for one another. I know it is going to take a long time for many to get back on their feet. We are doing what we can to help.

I salute the Governor of Tennessee. He was there the next day. So were many of their agencies, working seamlessly together. As I have said, last Friday we went there together with him. Through the State, we have arranged for Federal assistance, which will pay for 75 percent of the cost of fighting the fires.

Then that same day we went to some other counties in Tennessee that had experienced tornadoes about the same time. We went into McMinn County. No one was killed there, but several were hurt.

We went to Polk County where we talked with a lady named Mrs. Stoker, who wasn't hurt, but a trailer next to where she lived had been blown across the road, and her daughter and her

daughter's husband had been killed. We talked to her for a while, and the Governor and Senator CORKER and I were very impressed with her. We doubted that we would have the strength she does.

As we left, she said to us: You fellows go back on up there, do your job, and we will take care of it here.

I am sure she will, but I am awfully impressed with Mrs. Stoker.

I have told the people of Sevier County that many Senators had said something to me about the fire. For example, Senator FEINSTEIN called because of her experience in California.

I am here only to say those two things, first that the people of Sevier County, in Gatlinburg, the area of Polk County and McMinn County, if their character is measured by how they handled adversity, their character is over the top.

Secondly, I thank all of those who have tried to help.

One last example: In McMinn County, a young woman had a baby during the tornado. Her home was damaged. She went to the hospital. When she came back the next day, the neighbors had found another home for her. They had clean sheets and everything that she needed.

There are wonderful stories that came out of a terrifying series of instances. I wanted to come to the floor and say that we are proud of the people of East Tennessee.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Knoxville News Sentinel, Dec. 3, 2016]

GATLINBURG FIRE WAS SET IN MOTION
MONTHS AGO

(Op-ed by: Bob Hodge)

Greg Ward has spent his entire 53 years roaming around the woods and waters of Sevier County, many of them as one of the best known hunting and fishing guides in the state. When a lot of those woods starting burning he knew things could get bad.

Then again, he had suspected things were going to get bad for months.

The fire that has destroyed over 17,000 acres inside and outside the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, destroyed hundreds of buildings and cost at least 13 people their lives has left Ward wondering what, if anything, could have been done. He's lived his life and earned his living listening to what the mountains tell him.

"Everybody talks about the drought we've had this year, but the drought started in 2015," said Ward, owner of Rocky Top Outfitters in Pigeon Forge. "This year it just got a whole, whole lot worse."

Back in the summer, the drought which would lead to the out of control fires that would destroy so much was already wreaking havoc on the mountain fisheries. Trout stocking programs were curtailed in June because there was too little water in the creeks and rivers and what was there was too warm for stocked trout to survive. In July, Ward said he and his guides started noticing species harder than trout, like stonerollers, were beginning to die off.

Water flows and volume are measured in cubic feet per second or CFS. During the summer Ward said the CFS numbers in many of the rivers and streams in the mountains in and out of the park were about 10% of normal. That was bad for his fishing business,

but he thought it was just bad business, period.

"You would hear numbers about us being 8 or 10 inches below normal when it came to rainfall, but it was a lot worse than that in the French Broad Watershed," Ward said. "Whatever number they were saying it was probably double that."

"It's happened before back in the 1970s. We were in a drought cycle then and this was just like that."

It was so bad he had even thought that, maybe, it would be a good idea to delay the opening of hunting season in Sevier and other counties in the mountains. Fewer people in the woods would mean fewer opportunities for an accident to happen.

"There's a lot of hindsight people can have right now," Ward said.

Fast forward to Monday night and about 8 p.m. a knock came on the door at his home in Pigeon Forge near the base of Iron Mountain. It was the authorities telling Ward and his wife Diane to evacuate. They were ahead of the game, having already packed up papers and pictures and things that couldn't be replaced if lost.

After getting his wife to safety, Ward—this isn't too surprising to the people that know him—then drove up Pine Mountain to see what he could see.

It was devastating.

"There's nobody that knew anything like this was going to happen . . . but because of the drought you knew it could happen," he said. "From up on top (of Pine Mountain) you could see fire just about everywhere and you could see it moving because of the wind."

The stay wasn't a long one because even though the area where Ward was at was safely out of harm's way, he could see that what was not being threatened by the fire one minute was ablaze the next. He and a friend had packed chainsaws to cut through any trees that were blown down by the wind, and it turned out they needed them.

"I wasn't going to die on that mountain," he said. "We've had fires before. I've seen a lot of fires before, but there was so much fuel and so much wind . . ."

Eventually the fire would come within a few hundred yards of his house. But when he and his wife went back the next day it was no worse for wear.

"I have a house today because they made a stand at Dollywood."

Perseverance is the standard for the people that have been impacted by the fire.

Ward said he doesn't know what if anything, could have been done differently. All he knows is the fires that burned so much on Monday were set in motion months and months ago.

"It's been so god awful dry . . . it was that way two months ago," he said. "You had the drought and then this summer all the heat that just made it worse. We were just in an awful situation."

Mr. ALEXANDER. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. AYOTTE). The Senator from Indiana.

FAREWELL TO THE SENATE

Mr. COATS. Madam President, today I rise for the second time on the Senate floor to deliver a farewell speech. It doesn't seem like that long ago, back in 1998, that I delivered my first Senate farewell speech. I spoke then about making the transition from Senator to citizen, and I reflected on the end of 24 years of public service.

Standing here today in 2016, 24 years has now become 34 years, as the call for additional public service has brought

me back to the U.S. Senate. Now, as I begin today, I want to assure my family, some of whom are in the Gallery; my colleagues, some of whom I am pleased to see have come to hear me speak; my campaign contributors, and even the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee that I will not be back for a third farewell address.

Through it all—the ups and the downs, the highs and the lows, the successes and the failures—I have felt nothing but gratitude for the incredible privilege of serving. Serving in the military, working as a congressional staffer to then-Congressman Dan Quayle, serving in the House of Representatives, representing my home State, and as a U.S. Senator, and representing our country overseas as U.S. Ambassador to Germany—all of this together has been the adventure of a lifetime, and I am so very grateful for the opportunities I have been afforded. Participating in the process of governing, being in the arena fighting for the principles and values in which I believe—these experiences have all been a privilege almost beyond description.

It is time to express a few thanks. My good friend and fellow Senator from Tennessee, LAMAR ALEXANDER, who is sitting here today, who has a good habit of speaking words of wisdom, has said: When you are driving down a country road and see a turtle on the top of a fence post, chances are that turtle didn't get there on its own. I didn't get here on my own. Throughout my career, I have been blessed to have the support of so many talented and wonderful people who provided invaluable help along the way. First and foremost, though, I want to thank God for His providence, guiding my steps along the way. I want to thank my family, including my wife Marsha for her unwavering support and wise counsel, our three wonderful children, and our 10 grandchildren, for their love, their support, and their patience that allowed me to engage in the consuming job of an elected official.

I thank my former Senator and Vice President Dan Quayle, a mentor, friend, and the person who first encouraged me to consider public service. I want to express gratitude to former Indiana Governor Robert Orr, who chose me to fill the Senate seat vacated by then-Vice President Quayle.

I thank President George W. Bush, who gave me the opportunity to serve as our Nation's Ambassador to Germany, and Colin Powell, who led the Department of State during my time as Ambassador.

I thank the exceptional staff I have been blessed to have support me over the years—some who are here today and many who have served through the years and gone on to achieve great success in their own careers. I specifically want to thank the five chiefs of staff I have had as a Senator who have put the team together to support me in such exceptional ways: David Hoppe; Dave Gribbin, now deceased; Sharon

Soderstrom; Dean Hingson; and Viraj Mirani. All have led our team with exceptional leadership.

I thank my colleagues for their friendship and encouragement over the past 6 years. This is a demanding job, and we all work hard, but it is also a job that allows each of us the opportunity to spend a lot of time interacting together. The friendships I have had and now have with the talented men and women who serve in this distinguished body is what I will miss most in leaving the Senate.

Last, but certainly not least, I thank the citizens of Indiana. Hoosiers have given me the honor of representing them in the world's greatest deliberative body. Hoosiers, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Now, I am not here today to offer deep reflections about the health of this institution or to advise my fellow Senators on how to govern in the years ahead. It is clear that at this time in our history, in our great Nation, we are a divided country with two very different visions for America's future. The Senate is not immune to those divisions, but I firmly believe that all of us, Republicans and Democrats, are trying to do what we think is in the best interests of our country and its posterity. We are all united in the common cause of making our country a better place, a safer place, and a more prosperous place, even if our means of getting there differ.

With that spirit in mind, I know there are many topics of significant importance that the Senate will consider when I am gone, but I want to briefly discuss two transcendent issues that I believe jeopardize America's continued existence as the world's leading Nation. These are issues I have repeatedly expressed deep concern about on this Senate floor.

From a practical standpoint, our country simply cannot keep borrowing money we don't have. Today our national debt exceeds \$19.5 trillion and continues to grow by the second. Meanwhile, programs that millions of Americans depend on—Social Security and Medicare are two—are creeping ever closer to insolvency. America's looming fiscal storm is bearing down upon us, and the alarms are sounding louder each day. One day, if not addressed, this debt bomb will explode and have a devastating effect on our country's economy and on our children's future.

My second great concern is what I call the terrorist bomb—the threat posed by terrorists or rogue state actors who can successfully conduct an attack with weapons of mass destruction. We must ensure that the world's most dangerous weapons stay out of the hands of its most dangerous people, and we must also adapt to the new threats we face, such as a cyber attack, that could shut down our financial systems or electric grid. These challenges require all those who have governed to rise above the political consequences that may occur in making the hard decisions needed to make our country

stronger and more secure for future generations.

In conclusion, I would like to say this. My congressional career began during the Reagan administration. I would like to conclude my comments with a reflection on remarks President Ronald Reagan made during a memorial service in 1987 for the fallen sailors of the USS *Stark*. Allow me to quote a few of the words President Reagan shared that day:

Yes, they were ordinary men who did extraordinary things. Yes, they were heroes. And because they were heroes, let us not forget this: That for all the lovely spring and summer days we will never share with them again, for every Thanksgiving and Christmas that will seem empty without them, there will be moments when we see the light of discovery in young eyes, eyes that see for the first time the world around them and wonder, "Why is there such a place as America, and how is it that such a precious gift is mine?"

As citizens of this great country, we have been given a precious gift—the gift of freedom. America has been a beacon of freedom that has burned bright before a world that cries out for liberty, but we should never forget that we have been able to preserve this precious gift throughout our history because men and women have heard the call and then said: "I will stand in defense of freedom and I will sacrifice for future generations."

In looking back on my life of public service, I have experienced moments when I also have seen that light of discovery of this precious gift of America and asked myself: How is it this precious gift is mine? I have seen the light of discovery at Veterans Day ceremonies as we remind ourselves that this gift has been earned and preserved by those who have fought in defense of our freedoms and especially those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice. I have seen it in the eyes of wives and young children who rush into the arms of dads arriving home from the frontlines of battle. I have seen it in the tears of joy as our Olympic athletes stand while the "Star-Spangled Banner" is played before the eyes and ears of the world. I have seen it in the naturalization ceremonies, where immigrants like my mom expressed pure joy in becoming an American citizen.

Do we not then—those of us who have been given this privilege and the challenge of serving in this body as U.S. Senators—do we not then have an obligation and a solemn duty to carry on the task of ensuring that the young eyes of future generations can see this light of discovery and continue to wonder how it is that such a precious gift is theirs?

So, my colleagues and friends, with gratitude to the Almighty, love in my heart for each of you, and bright hopes for the future of our beloved country, I bid farewell.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Indiana.

TRIBUTES TO DAN COATS

Mr. DONNELLY. Madam President, I rise as we bid farewell to my good friend, my colleague, my captain, the senior Senator from Indiana, DAN COATS, who has served his State of Indiana and our country so well and with such honor and such dedication for more than 35 years.

I also note how grateful I am to be serving with the Presiding Officer, for what an extraordinary Senator you have been, what a good friend. Someday I hope to come see the White Mountains of New Hampshire and visit and see your family. We have been very lucky to have been touched and blessed by you.

As many of us know, my friend DAN's service to his country started long before he was elected to this body. After graduating from Wheaton College in Illinois—and he has not often told folks he was a soccer star there—he joined the U.S. Army, where he served from 1966 until 1968 and earned the rank of staff sergeant.

After coming to Indiana to earn a law degree at Indiana University's McKinney School of Law in Indianapolis, DAN moved to Fort Wayne, where he continued his public service as a staff member for then-U.S. Congressman Dan Quayle.

In 1980, DAN COATS was elected to represent the Fourth Congressional District of Indiana—a wonderful area which he served so well—and it was an office he held for 8 years. Then, in 1988, as Senator Quayle was elected to serve as Vice President, Senator COATS was appointed to the U.S. Senate, and he successfully won reelection in 1990 and in 1992. For 10 years, DAN continued his legacy of service to our beloved State.

As I mentioned, DAN is the senior Senator, and I am the junior Senator, so whenever we have football discussions, DAN wins every time.

Through his work on the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Intelligence Committee, he ensured our country was more secure and more prosperous for the future.

In 1999, DAN retired from the Senate. He was soon called back, though, when President Bush asked him to serve our country again—this time, as U.S. Ambassador to Germany.

Then-Ambassador COATS arrived in Germany ready for his duties on September 8, 2001. We know how much our world changed 3 days later and how important his job became in ensuring the United States continued its constructive relationship with our German allies and in keeping all of us safe back here at home. He not only forged a strong relationship with then-German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder and Angela Merkel, but he also played a key role in the establishment of a new U.S. embassy in the heart of Berlin. It is hard to stress how critical DAN COATS' leadership was for our country at that time, as he used American diplomacy to help maintain American security.

In 2011, DAN made his return to the Senate, eager once again to serve the

people of Indiana. Over the last 6 years, he has produced steadfast leadership on the Finance Committee, the Intelligence Committee, and the Joint Economic Committee.

On a more personal note, I have always been able to count on him as a partner and a thoughtful friend, willing to work together to address the many issues impacting Hoosiers and our whole country—because, when it comes down to it, we are Americans, and we are all in this together.

DAN always has been ready to roll up his sleeves and work in a bipartisan manner, whether it was on an issue impacting our veterans, protecting our national security, advocating for fiscal responsibility, or even the finer issues of government, such as making sure the Government Printing Office could change their style guide. As the rest of us all know, DAN was able to make it clear that we are not Indianians; we are Hoosiers, and it should be appropriately discussed as such.

DAN, it has been an honor to serve with you.

He has been a true gentleman and a great teammate in our work to improve the lives of the hardworking Hoosier families we represent. I am proud of the work we have done together.

As DAN leaves the Senate, I wish my friend and partner—my senior Senator—the best. He will be remembered for his extraordinary service, his love of country, his love of our State, and his love of his family. I hope he will be able to spend a lot of time with his wonderful wife Marsha, their 3 children, and their 10 grandchildren. DAN has been blessed to have a wonderful family, and we have been blessed that we could be a part of his life.

May God bless Senator COATS and his family, may God bless Indiana, and may God bless America.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maine.

Ms. COLLINS. Madam President, as I have listened to the eloquent farewell remarks of my friend and colleague, Senator DAN COATS of Indiana, I could not help but think that he sounded happy, contented, serene, and at peace with the decision he has made. But he leaves the rest of us feeling bereft and sad and knowing that we will miss him as a friend and as an esteemed colleague.

As the 114th Congress draws to a close, many words of affection and gratitude will be offered in tribute to our friend and colleague DAN COATS as he leaves this Chamber. But there is no word that better defines this outstanding leader than the one word that has guided his entire life, and that word is "service."

As we have heard from his colleague from Indiana, the junior Senator, in 1966, at the height of the Vietnam war, DAN COATS enlisted in the U.S. Army, achieving the rank of staff sergeant. In 1980, he was elected to the U.S. House

of Representatives from Indiana's Fourth Congressional District, and he joined the Senate 8 years later. He quickly became widely known and deeply respected as a strong voice for fiscal discipline and national security and as an expert in our intelligence agencies and foreign affairs.

DAN COATS left the Senate in 1999 and was named as U.S. Ambassador to Germany 2 years later. He arrived at his post in Berlin just 3 days before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I cannot help but think how fortunate our country was to have him in that key position at a time of such turmoil, anxiety, and fear for our country and all the world. He played a central role in strengthening the relationship between our Nation and Germany during that critical time.

After his tenure as Ambassador had ended, Senator COATS continued his service. He became the president of Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America and offered his talents to many other civic and volunteer organizations, including the Center for Jewish and Christian Values, which he chaired with another dear friend of mine, Senator Joe Lieberman. With his wife Marsha, he founded the Foundation for American Renewal to advance faith-based solutions and initiatives to help resolve our Nation's many social problems.

When DAN COATS returned to the Senate in 2012, he pledged to the people of Indiana and to our Nation that he would focus his tremendous energy and extraordinary intellect on cutting wasteful spending, reducing our national debt, promoting pro-growth, job-creating policies, and strengthening our national security in an era where we face numerous threats from every possible place. He has kept those promises. As a father and a grandfather—two roles that I know he cherishes—Senator COATS has taken to heart our obligation to ensure a sound economic future for the next generation.

It has been a particular honor to work side by side with DAN COATS on the Intelligence Committee. His public service through that committee will never be fully known to the public, but I can share with you that Senator COATS has almost an instinctual ability to get to the heart of an issue, no matter how complex or difficult the topic. That, of course, is also a tribute to the fact that he has thought so deeply about the issues that confront our country and the threats posed by rogue states and terrorist groups. He was one of the first Members of the Senate to recognize the crisis that would emerge due to this administration's failed policy and incoherent strategy toward Syria.

His strong and effective advocacy for improved cyber security, a passion that we share, is another example of his deep commitment to the safety and security of our Nation and its people. For years, Senator COATS has worked to protect our Nation's most critical in-

frastructure from devastating cyber attacks. Senator COATS has warned us that it is not a matter of if but of when such attacks occur right here in our country. He did so—he led the way—knowing of the political pressure that would be brought to bear to accept the status quo of cyber insecurity that exists within our country's most important infrastructure.

Senator DAN COATS is an inspiring role model to all of us who seek to serve. He epitomizes dedication, effective service, and an untiring commitment to making America—already the greatest country in the world—an even better place to live. Our Nation is truly grateful to this great man, and I am so grateful for his friendship.

I wish Senator COATS and his family all the best in the years to come.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. PORTMAN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. PORTMAN. Madam President, I speak today as a neighbor of DAN COATS. I am his neighbor here on the Senate floor, and I am his neighbor back home. I represent the State of Ohio, and he represents Indiana. I also was involved in DAN COATS' early political career because I was asked to interview him when I was a young lawyer for his potential move from the House to the Senate. There was no way to be involved in that process without acquiring great respect and admiration for this man.

I got to know about his family and his background. He is literally and figuratively a Boy Scout in every way. He is also a guy who we will miss here greatly. He has become the voice of reason, the voice of wisdom, and the voice of knowledge here in the Senate. In our conference meetings, he is the person who, when he stands up to speak, others stop their conversations and actually listen, which is a rare trait for people in public office sometimes. But that is because DAN is always sincere, he is to the point, and, again, he has the experience and knowledge to be able to speak intelligently on a whole range of issues—some which we heard about today on the national security front. But also, he is an advocate for economic growth. He is the leader here on tax reform proposals. He is the guy who continually reminds us of our solemn duty here to represent all the people.

So, DAN, we will miss you greatly. I know Marsha is happy to have you around a little more. You are going to have a great time with your grandkids, as we have talked about. But we know that there will be a great loss here when you move on. I have to find a new neighbor.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Missouri.

Mr. BLUNT. Madam President, I have one story I want to tell about Senator COATS.

We have been able to serve together on the Intel Committee. We sit near each other on that committee. We work together on other things.

I came to the Senate when Senator COATS came back to the Senate. It has already been established here that he served and then served in another capacity as Ambassador. Then in 2010, when the Presiding Officer and I came to the Senate, he came with us. In almost everything in the Senate, there is some element of seniority in how everything is done.

As the only person in our class with prior Senate service, DAN COATS is the ranking member of our class. He was 88th in seniority in the Senate the day he started his second term of the Senate. For circumstances, I turned out to be 89th.

In the process of going through and selecting offices, when they got to 88, DAN COATS called me, standing in the hallway of the Russell Senate Office Building, and he said: I am standing here in front of an office that says it was Harry Truman's office when he was in the Senate. You choose after me; don't you?

I said: Yes, I choose after you.

He said: If I don't take this office, will you take it?

It was the best of the 12 offices still left. That wouldn't have been the reason I would take it, but I said: Yes, I will take that office. It would be great for me to be in an office in which Harry Truman had spent 10 years while in the Senate, and I later found out he also spent 82 days as Vice President in that office.

I said: I will stay there if I take that office.

I am actually the only Member who—every year when the question comes around “Do you want to look at another office?” I check the “no” box and send it right back. Almost everybody else checks the “yes” box because they want to see the real estate in the building that is available.

I said: I will stay there if I take it.

He said: Well, I am going to find an office somewhere else.

I have chaired the Rules Committee in the last couple of years. I deal with lots of Members about lots of requests. I don't actually know of very many similar circumstances. In fact, I don't know of any exactly like that one where Senator COATS said: I want you to have the office.

I mentioned it to him again the other day, and he said: You know, the reason for that was, it was the right thing to do.

If there is any part of DAN COATS' character that comes through time after time, it is that part. It is that part of who he is that always wants to do the right thing. He is a man of great conscience, of great courage, of great

willingness to serve. He is a good friend, and it has been one of the honors of my life in elected office that I have gotten to spend 6 years working in the Senate with him.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maryland.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam President, first, I notice that Senator COATS is still on the floor. I want to add my personal congratulations to Senator COATS for an incredible career of public service, not only here in the Senate but serving our country in a very important diplomatic role.

Senator COATS has added such dignity to this body. He is a person of incredible integrity and a person who always listens and tries to do what is right not only for the people of his State but for our Nation. It has been a real honor to serve with Senator COATS in the U.S. Senate, and I wish him only the best going forward. I know he will continue to find ways to help our country.

21ST CENTURY CURES ACT

Madam President, I rise today to comment on a provision in the 21st Century Cures Act that I have strong concerns about that would affect thousands of patients receiving home infusion therapy. As many of my colleagues know, home infusion therapy is important because it provides patients with a higher quality of life. Patients are able to receive this treatment in the comfort of their own home, surrounded by their family. Furthermore, home infusion therapy eliminates unnecessary emergency room visits and travel to and from hospitals.

A provision in the Cures Act reduces the payment for infusion drugs without including a payment for home infusion services until January 1, 2021. As a result, home infusion suppliers will not be paid to administer infusion therapy until 4 years after the change in reimbursement. Without a service payment, it will be economically difficult for home infusion suppliers to provide patients with home infusion therapy. Many patients will be unable to receive care in the comfort of their home and will have to go to hospitals and long-term care facilities to receive treatment. This provision in 21st Century Cures Act could affect over 20,000 people with congestive heart failure, neurological disorders, and immune deficiency problems who receive home infusion therapy.

Patients' lives are at stake. That is why I prepared an amendment to the 21st Century Cures Act that delays the reimbursement change for infusion drugs by 1 year. I hope that this amendment could be included in the 21st Century Cures Act or the end of session continuing resolution. Instead of going into effect on January 1, 2017, the overpayment reduction would go into effect on January 1, 2018, under my amendment. This is only a 1-year delay, but it would allow 20,000 patients to continue receiving infusion therapy at home. I think this is reasonable and fair and I urge my colleagues to support the amendment.

The 21st Century Cures Act includes many very important provisions that should be enacted, so I hope this issue can be corrected.

TRIBUTE TO BARBARA A. MIKULSKI

Madam President, this is a bittersweet moment as I rise to pay tribute to my esteemed colleague, dear friend, and fellow Senator, BARBARA A. MIKULSKI, the longest serving woman in the history of the United States Congress.

Senator BARB has been more than a dedicated champion for the State of Maryland; she has fought tirelessly for the welfare of all Americans across the country but especially the disadvantaged—equal pay for equal work, funding for childcare for working families, quality health care for all Americans, an ambitious space exploration program, robust homeland security programs, and fire protection grants. These are but a few of the causes Senator BARB has worked on for more than four decades as an outstanding public servant and legislator.

She is rooted in the city we both call home, Baltimore, where her father ran a grocery store in Highlandtown. She earned her bachelor of science degree in sociology from Mount Saint Agnes College and a master of social work degree from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. She became a social worker and then demonstrated her formidable organizational skills and resolve when she led the successful opposition to a 16-lane highway that was going to cut through the Fells Point neighborhood in Baltimore. Throughout her 40 years of congressional service, she has returned to Baltimore almost every night.

She ran for the city council in 1971, where she served for 5 years before she was elected to the House of Representatives to represent Maryland's Third District—a seat she held for 10 years. I was proud to succeed her in the House when she was elected to the Senate in 1986 and became the first female Democratic Senator elected in her own right. Here in the Halls of the Senate, she opened doors that had previously been closed to women. She refused to accept second-class treatment because of her gender and fought to be recognized as an equal. Generations of young women who chose to participate in public life or who dreamed of joining the U.S. Senate have benefited from Senator BARB's trailblazing legacy.

From affordable housing and education to childcare, health benefits, and pensions, she has left an indelible imprint on the Nation's social policies as a senior member of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. It is fitting that she authored the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009—the first major bill to be signed into law by the first African-American President. I know one of her proudest accomplishments is strengthening the social safety net for seniors by passing the Spousal Anti-Impoverishment Act, which helps keep seniors from going into bankruptcy while paying for a spouse's nursing home care.

Senator BARB said, "We work on macro issues and macaroni and cheese

issues. . . . Our national debate reflects the needs and dreams of American families."

In 2012, she became the first woman and the first Marylander to chair the Senate Appropriations Committee. She has worked well with Senator COCHRAN and other Republicans on the committee to produce annual appropriations bills under difficult budget constraints. I think she has shown how the Senate can work in a productive, bipartisan fashion.

Senator MIKULSKI has served as the dean of the women Senators from both parties, promoting collegiality, civility, and consensus-building. In this capacity, again, she has been one of the leaders of this institution with respect to making it work better.

Senator BARB has always had her feet planted firmly on the ground, but she has reached for the stars. No one has been a stronger advocate for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA; the National Science Foundation, NSF; and for researching and understanding the universe to make life better here on Earth than Senator BARBARA MIKULSKI.

Not only has she reached for the stars, she is a star. NASA named a supernova after her in 2012—Supernova Mikulski—discovered, fittingly, by the Hubble Space Telescope on January 25, 2012. The supernova is 7.5 billion light-years away and the remnants of a star more than eight times as massive as our own Sun.

Senator MIKULSKI has so much political energy per square inch of height that she has reached her own orbit in space. Even though her realm includes the entire universe, Senator BARB always kept the needs of Marylanders close to her heart during her tenure. Whether it is fighting for funding to restore the Chesapeake Bay, supporting mass transit improvements in Baltimore, standing up for Federal employees and retirees who work and live in our State, or posting the world's best recipe for crabcakes on her Web site, I know I speak on behalf of each and every Marylander when I say how much we will miss her outstanding leadership and unwavering commitment to our State.

I am privileged to have worked with Senator BARB for 10 years in the Senate and for 20 years before that when I was in the House of Representatives. I am proud to have stood alongside her as two members of Team Maryland.

On a personal basis, I have a very close friend and my service in the Senate is much more productive, much more enjoyable, and much more rewarding because of Senator BARBARA MIKULSKI.

The United States Congress, the State of Maryland, the United States, and, indeed, the world are better places because of Senator MIKULSKI's public

service. She may not be the tallest Senator, but she certainly leaves the biggest shoes to fill. I will miss her, but I will remain internally inspired by her shining example of public service at its best.

TRIBUTE TO BARBARA BOXER

Madam President, for the 10 years I have been in the Senate, I have been privileged and have had the pleasure to serve alongside the Senator from California, BARBARA BOXER, on the Committee on Environment and Public Works and on the Committee on Foreign Relations. She is the ranking member of the Environment and Public Works Committee and previously chaired the committee, the first woman to do so.

Senator BOXER has spent the last 40 years in elective office—24 years here in the Senate, 10 years before in the U.S. House of Representatives, and 6 years on the Marin County Board of Supervisors. She was the board's first woman president. Earlier, she worked as a stockbroker while her husband Stewart, whom she met at Brooklyn College, attended law school. Senator BOXER has been a journalist and is the author of two books.

The first time Senator BOXER ran for the Sixth Congressional District seat, in 1982, her campaign slogan was "BARBARA BOXER gives a damn." Her constituents have agreed. She ran for reelection four times and never received less than 67 percent of the vote. In 2004, when she was running for a third term in the Senate, she received 6.96 million votes—the most votes any candidate has ever received in the history of the U.S. Senate.

Oscar Madison and Felix Unger may have been the original odd couple, but Senator BOXER and the Senator from Oklahoma, Senator INHOFE, have been the Senate's odd couple. An unabashed liberal and unabashed conservative working together to pass some of the most important legislation of the last quarter century—our periodic surface transportation bills and the Water Resources Development Act reauthorizations. These bills have put millions of Americans to work and made our economy more efficient.

Senator BOXER understands the importance of building, and she also understands the importance of preserving. She has helped to set aside more than 1 million acres of Federal land in California as wilderness. The omnibus public lands package, which became law in 2009, includes three Boxer bills to protect 57,000 acres in Big Sur and the Los Padres Forest and another 273,000 acres of California coast as wilderness. She wrote the Senate bill that elevated Pinnacles National Monument into America's 59th national park. She helped champion the creation of the Fort Ord National Monument and Cesar Chavez National Monument and was instrumental in expanding the Gulf of the Farallones and Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuaries. She also authored the Cali-

fornia Missions Preservation Act to protect and restore California's 21 historic missions and led the effort in the Senate to create the Manzanar National Historic Site.

Senator BOXER's concern for the environment hasn't been just a parochial interest; no one has fought harder to defend and improve our Nation's landmark environmental laws, such as the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. She fought to remove arsenic from drinking water. The air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat are better because of Senator BOXER.

Senator BOXER's environmental bonafides are well known, but she has been a superbly effective legislator on so many other issues. She is a champion for women. In 1991, she led a group of women Members to the Judiciary Committee to demand that the committee, which was all-male and all-White at the time, take Anita Hill's charges seriously. Senator BOXER has defended women's reproductive health choices and privacy. She was involved in passing the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act and the Violence Against Women's Act. She is a senior member of the Foreign Relations Committee, where she chairs the first committee to focus on global women's issues.

In a business meeting earlier today, the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee unanimously passed a resolution honoring Senator BOXER's work on that committee and her work in the U.S. Senate. At that time, we noted that she was the ranking member on the subcommittee that provided help for women and girls globally, and her work in Afghanistan was most notable. She has made a difference around the world for young women.

Senator BOXER authored the first ever specific authorization for after-school programs, a bipartisan bill that then-President George W. Bush signed into law in 2002. Today's afterschool programs are funded at \$1.15 billion, allowing them to serve 1.6 million children. She was the author of another bipartisan bill to accelerate America's contribution to combat global HIV-AIDS and tuberculosis.

Senator BOXER wrote two laws to enhance economic and security cooperation with Israel. In 2012, she worked with the Senator from Georgia, Mr. ISAKSON, on the United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act, which extended loan guarantees to Israel, increased the U.S. military stockpile in Israel, and encouraged NATO-Israel cooperation. In 2014, she worked with the Senator from Missouri, Mr. BLUNT, on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Act of 2014, further strengthening economic and security cooperation between the two countries.

Senator BOXER has strong principles. She can be outspoken when the need arises, but she is also a consummate legislator, able to work across the aisle and across the Hill to get important things done. We are going to miss her

skills and her leadership. I know we will continue to hear from her because she is not the retiring type, but she certainly has earned the right to spend more time with her husband Stewart, their children Doug and Nicole, and four grandchildren.

We wish her well, and we will miss her in the Senate.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Utah.

FREE SPEECH RIGHTS

Mr. LEE. Madam President, over the weekend, syndicated columnist George Will wrote about a disturbing ruling in a French court. The court ruled that a video called "Dear Future Mom," produced by the Global Down Syndrome Foundation, must be banned from television. It cannot be viewed on television anywhere in France. What, you might ask, triggered this draconian act of censorship? Was it speech inciting violence? No. Was it a hate speech? No. Was it discrimination? In fact, it is the opposite, as it turns out. I will let Mr. Will tell the story as I read the words from his column.

The column is entitled "The 'right' to be spared from guilt."

The word "inappropriate" is increasingly used inappropriately. It is useful to describe departures from good manners and other social norms, such as wearing white after Labor Day and using the salad fork with the entree.

But the adjective has become a splatter of verbal fudge, a weasel word falsely suggesting measured seriousness. Its misty imprecision does not disguise, but advertises the user's moral obtuseness.

A French court has demonstrated how "inappropriate" can be an all-purpose device of intellectual evasion and moral cowardice. The court said it is inappropriate to do something that might disturb people who killed their unborn babies for reasons that were, shall we say, inappropriate.

Prenatal genetic testing enables pregnant women to be apprised of a variety of problems with their unborn babies, including Down syndrome. It is a congenital condition resulting from a chromosomal defect that causes varying degrees of mental disability and some physical abnormalities, such as low muscle tone, small stature, flatness of the back of the head, and an upward slant to the eyes. Within living memory, Down syndrome people were called Mongoloids. Now they are included in the category called "special needs" people. What they most need is nothing special. It is for people to understand their aptitudes, and to therefore quit killing them in utero.

Down syndrome, although not common, is among the most common anomalies at 49.7 percent per 100,000 births. In approximately 90 percent of instances when prenatal genetic testing reveals Down syndrome, the baby is aborted. Cleft lips or palates, which occur in 72.6 percent per 100,000 births, also can be diagnosed in utero and sometimes are the reason a baby is aborted.

In 2014, in conjunction with World Down Syndrome Day (March 21), the Global Down Syndrome Foundation prepared a two-minute video titled "Dear Future Mom" to assuage the anxieties of pregnant women who have learned that they are carrying a Down syndrome baby.

More than 7 million people have seen the video online in which one such woman says,

"I'm scared: What kind of life will my child have?" Down syndrome children from many nations tell the woman that her child will hug, speak, go to school, tell you he loves you and "can be happy, just like I am—and you'll be happy too."

The French state is not happy about this. The court has ruled that the video is—wait for it—"inappropriate" for French television. The court upheld the ruling in which the French Broadcasting Council had banned the video as a commercial.

The court said the video's depiction of happy Down syndrome children was "likely to disturb the conscience of women who had lawfully made different choices."

So, what happens on campuses does not stay on campuses. There, in many nations, sensitivity bureaucracies have been enforcing the relatively new entitlement to be shielded from what might disturb, even inappropriate jokes.

And now this rapidly metastasizing right has come to this:

A video that accurately communicates a truthful proposition—that Down syndrome people can be happy and give happiness—should be suppressed because some people might become ambivalent, or morally queasy about having chosen to extinguish such lives because . . .

This is why the video giving facts about Down syndrome people is so subversive of the flaccid consensus among those who say aborting a baby is of no moral significance than removing a tumor from a stomach. Pictures persuade.

Today's improved prenatal sonograms make graphic the fact that the moving fingers and beating heart are not mere "fetal material." They are a baby. Toy maker Fisher-Price, children's apparel manufacturer OshKosh, McDonald's and Target have featured Down syndrome children in ads that the French court would probably ban from television.

The court has said, in effect, that the lives of Down syndrome people—and by inescapable implication, the lives of many other disabled people—matter less than the serenity of people who have acted on one or more of three vicious principles:

That the lives of the disabled are not worth living. Or the lives of the disabled are of negligible value next to the desire of parents to have a child who has no special, meaning inconvenient, needs. Or that government should suppress the voices of Down syndrome children in order to guarantee other people's right not to be disturbed by reminders that they have made lethal choices on the basis of one or both of the first two inappropriate principles.

That is the end of Mr. Will's column, which I just read in its entirety.

As Americans enter yet another era of change in our politics, it is my sincere hope, and indeed my prayer, that it can also be a season of change in our hearts. Here in the United States, the free speech rights of groups like the Global Down Syndrome Foundation to produce videos like "Dear Future Mom," which I highly recommend, are protected by the First Amendment, but the rights of actual Americans with Down syndrome, both born and unborn, can only be protected by their fellow citizens, not just in our laws but in our communities, our families, and our culture.

This time of year, we would all do well to remember the life-changing joy that can come from a single, unexpected, and special child, and also re-

member the courage of their mothers and fathers who chose life—the heroes who chose to make room at the inn.

I know I speak for all of my colleagues when I wish all of them a very merry Christmas.

I thank the Presiding Officer and yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WARNER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MINERS PROTECTION ACT

Mr. WARNER. Madam President, I rise to join my colleague who spoke earlier today, the Senator from Ohio, and here shortly, the Senator from Pennsylvania. I wish to also thank my friend, the Senator from West Virginia. Without his tireless efforts, this cause we are fighting for might not still have a chance, and I want to commend him for the countless hours and the amazing amount of work he has done on an issue we have been here time and again on; that is, begging this body to take meaningful action on the Miners Protection Act before the end of this year.

For over a year and a half, we have been coming to the floor to tell our colleagues that if we do nothing, retired coal miners and their families—for the most part we are talking about widows because most of the miners have passed away—will lose their health care at the end of this year. Well, the end of the year is upon us. It is literally days away, and we have taken every procedural step to ensure a vote on the Miners Protection Act.

Under the leadership of the Senator from West Virginia, we were asked to go through regular order. We were asked to have a hearing. Those of us on the Finance Committee—the Senator from Pennsylvania and I—were asked to have a committee markup. We had the committee markup. We reported the bill out with strong bipartisan support. Yet here we are, days away from the supposed end of the session, and we still have not had that vote. We have a long-term bipartisan solution, but instead we are being told the CR that might simply fund the government for a few months may have some kind of stop-gap effort—a stop-gap effort that would barely provide enough time, for those who were already threatened with losing their health care at the end of the year—barely have enough time to even reschedule a doctor's appointment.

These miners—many of them have faced devastating illnesses as a result of their time in the mines—will be given absolutely no certainty that they will receive the medical care they need if we simply were to extend this bill to the time of the CR. And what would happen after May 1? And that has nothing to say to the more than 100,000 min-

ers across the country—thousands of them in my State of Virginia—who lose not only health care but also future pension benefits that are threatened by the approaching insolvency of the United Mine Workers 1974 pension fund.

Madam President, you may not know this—as a matter of fact, even my colleague from West Virginia didn't realize this—but today, December 6, is actually National Miners Day. Each year on December 6, we set aside a day to honor the mine workers of today and yesterday and reflect on their contributions to our Nation and rededicate ourselves to doing everything we can to protect their lives and health. Think about that. Today is actually National Miners Day. What better day to take the long awaited action to make sure that for those miners—and particularly, more often than not, for their widows—we honor the commitment that was made back in 1947 to make sure that their health care and pension benefits—at least their health care benefits—are guaranteed. The reality is that even with stronger safety standards, coal mining remains a dangerous and difficult profession. The truth is that nobody can really understand what it is like to be in a mine unless you have been underground. I have had that opportunity a number of times in my career. So many of the miners I worked with and supported when I was Governor and now as I am a Senator have seen all the changes that have come about by the changing nature of the industry, by globalization and by technology. Now many of those communities are on hard times. If we produce one more hit to these communities—a hit whereby the Federal Government doesn't honor the commitment they made to those miners in terms of protecting the health care of the miners and their families—then, quite honestly, we are not doing our job.

We have come together and worked in a bipartisan fashion. We have a solution. We have a solution that wouldn't add to the debt or the deficit. I hope that those who are holding up this long-term solution—and it is not simply one side. We have complete support on this side of the aisle and from a number of our colleagues on the other side of the aisle. Again, we ask: Let's make sure these miners, their widows, and their families don't lose their health care come the end of this year. We can ensure that happens, and I look forward to working with my colleagues to make sure that promise becomes a reality.

With that, I yield the floor to my colleague from Pennsylvania.

Mr. MANCHIN. We are close. It is West Virginia.

I yield the floor to my dear friend and colleague, the Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I have a parliamentary inquiry.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GARDNER). The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, it was my understanding that I was going to follow the Senator from Connecticut on the VA bill, and I am happy to accommodate the Senator from West Virginia or the Senator from Pennsylvania or the Senator from Connecticut, whomever knows what order we should be in.

Mr. MANCHIN. Sir, that is so kind of you. If we could do that, since the Senator is not here, then we can be very brief on ours, if you don't mind.

Mr. ISAKSON. Will I yield to the Senator from West Virginia?

Mr. MANCHIN. Yes.

Mr. ISAKSON. And then would you yield to the Senator from Connecticut?

Mr. MANCHIN. Let's let you do yours now. Go ahead. The Senator from Connecticut can go ahead.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to recognize the Senator from Connecticut, the Senator from Georgia, and then the Senator from Pennsylvania.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I want to thank my colleagues who are very gracious for yielding to me, and I thank the Presiding Officer for recognizing me.

VETERANS HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS LEGISLATION

Mr. President, there is welcome news today, which is that the Senate has received from the House H.R. 6416, a bipartisan comprehensive measure that keeps faith with our veterans and makes sure that we continue our progress toward leaving no veteran behind.

I want to emphasize at the very start that this measure is a down payment. It is far from a final or even fully acceptable solution to many of the problems that it addresses. It has more than 70 provisions. It is broad and comprehensive in scope and scale. More vets, many at risk and homeless, will receive the care and benefits they need and deserve. VA hospitals will have better management and more mental health caregivers and emergency room doctors. Families of veterans will be helped by extending critical education benefits to surviving members of those families. Work will finally begin to help descendants of veterans exposed to toxic substances. But again, on those issues and so many more, we are only taking another step in what must be a journey toward helping our veterans with services that they need, deserve, and have earned.

One example that is long awaited is a landmark move that will commence research on descendants of veterans who have been exposed to toxic substances and address the painful residual wounds. It is all the more important today because we know the modern field of combat is ridden with nerve gas and other toxic and poisonous substances that all too often may endan-

ger not only the brave men and women engaged on the battlefield but also their descendants. This measure expands the definition of homeless veterans to include individuals—perhaps women fleeing domestic violence—and it broadens the eligibility for critical homeless prevention programs. Many of those women fleeing brutality and violence deserve this kind of help.

Under this legislation, the Veterans Health Administration will be given the flexibility it needs in scheduling physician workloads to bring them in line with the common practice that prevails in most medical centers. It is past time that we adjust the 1950s schedules, practices, and policies to work regulations within the VA hospitals and the need of today's veterans.

One extraordinarily important provision relates to mental health, long a priority for me. We will make it easier to hire mental health counselors and access mental health treatment, significantly overhauling VA construction practices and authorize major medical construction projects in Reno, NV, and Long Beach, CA.

On the issue of accountability that is so critically important and needs so much work, a provision in this measure would limit the ability of the VA to place an employee who is under investigation for misconduct on paid administrative leave for more than 14 days. This limitation would end the current practice of placing problematic employees on long periods of paid administrative leave and the provision would force the VA leaders to address issues when they arise to impose accountability.

I want to thank my colleague Senator ISAKSON for his leadership, his dedication, his attention to detail, and his flexibility in the best traditions of this body. He clearly has put veterans first by sharing their ideas. They have come to us from many of the veterans service organizations, and I want to acknowledge all of them as well because they have been such a positive force.

I want to thank my staff on the Veterans' Affairs Committee for their work on this bill and others that we passed, such as the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, which I did in partnership with Senator KAINE and Senator ISAKSON.

We need to do more to help veterans cope with opioid addiction, combat homelessness, protect veterans against identity theft, and make sure that our health care system for veterans continues to improve. It is still clearly a work in progress and still fails to meet the demands of access for thousands and tens of thousands of our veterans, even as it provides quality health care to many others.

Many of the current challenges faced by veterans are directly attributable to management failures, and that is why accountability needs to improve. I want to thank Senators BURR and TESTER for their bipartisan agreement to move forward on these challenges,

and, hopefully, we will continue their work in the next session. Likewise, I have worked with Senator MORAN and Chairman ISAKSON on numerous accountability reforms in the Veterans First Act, which was before this Chamber, again, providing goals and measures that we must achieve in the next Congress.

Our bipartisan efforts to pass, hopefully within the next few days, H.R. 6416 is a crucial test of whether there is the necessary will and determination in this body to move ahead on the enormous challenges yet unmet and the enormous obligations that we have.

Just as critical as the health care challenges, so too are the chronic problems in providing veterans the benefits they have earned—benefits that are denied them in decisions they appeal. Today, over 450,000 veterans' appeals await a decision. That is why I introduced the Department of Veterans Affairs Appeals Modernization Act of 2016. The present veterans' appeals process is a travesty. It is a mockery of justice. It must be reformed. It must be given the resources to make it effective. Even when veterans earn benefits, there are too many examples of unequal application. I joined Senator MURRAY in her efforts to ensure that all caregivers for severely wounded and disabled veterans, regardless of when the veterans have served, have access to caregiver support services. These caregivers are moms and dads, spouses, and children who provide care day after day after day at great expense and burden to them with very little support from the Nation that should be as grateful to them as to the veterans themselves.

Simply put, veterans deserve better, and they deserve more. Even when they have grievances, often they are denied a day in court. They are forced into arbitration agreements concerning their reemployment rights and workplace protections. That is why I introduced the Justice for Servicemembers Act in June—to clarify that servicemembers cannot be denied access to the courthouse and forced into arbitration and that servicemembers cannot be forced to sacrifice those rights as a condition of future or continued employment. It is about basic American justice. Who deserves that justice more than our veterans who fought for it and died for it and should never be denied it?

I want to thank again all of my colleagues who have worked with me over these past 2 years. We owe every veteran—regardless of the war or the conflict, regardless of the era—the basic guarantee that they will never be left behind, that this Nation will keep faith with them. This body owes them the obligation to summon the political will to cross partisan lines to make sure that we keep faith with them.

As I yield the floor today, I want to express my gratitude again to Chairman ISAKSON and say that I yield the floor today but none of us should ever yield in the fight to help our veterans.

Thank you, Mr. President.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Connecticut for his recognition. I want to take this moment on the floor to praise him for the contribution he has made to the committee over the last 2 years.

I want to tell you a story. RICHARD became ranking member in the same year and at the same time that I became chairman. We met, we made a commitment to one another that we were going to move forward as a united Veterans' Affairs Committee, address the problems of our veterans, and do it in a bipartisan fashion. To set the tone for that, we introduced the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, which RICHARD BLUMENTHAL introduced, and passed it unanimously in the committee and 99 to zero on the floor of the Senate in the first weeks of this Congress. We did so to set the table that whatever the problems are, we should never let our pettiness, our politics, and our partisanship stop us from helping a veteran. Because of RICHARD BLUMENTHAL on suicide prevention and our commitment to make it bipartisan, we passed that unanimously early on in the session and since that time have addressed other issues as well.

The bill we discussed today, which is named in part for RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, is, as he said a minute ago, a down payment on the continuing debt we owe to our veterans who have served us well. On the first day in the committee when I took over as chairman, I said: You know, there are no Republican veterans and no Democratic veterans; there are only American veterans. They are the Americans who fought for our flag, fought for our Constitution, fought for our liberty, and fought for each of us.

I am proud to have fought with RICHARD for our veterans in the foxhole of the Senate.

There is much left to be done. With the passage of this act today, which is named after Senator BLUMENTHAL and Congressman JEFF MILLER, who is retiring from the House, we are making another down payment on what we owe our veterans.

There are other payments soon to come. I met earlier today with JOHN MCCAIN. We have made a commitment to make sure Veterans Choice is made permanent for our veterans and work to see that veterans have the best choice they can have, not to privatize the VA but to optimize the exposure of veterans to health care services wherever they need them.

Last night I met with JON TESTER, our colleague from Montana, who will replace Richard as the new ranking member of the committee. He is equally committed with us to see to it that we move beyond the current sunset of the Veterans Choice Program, to solve the Veterans Choice Program as well as the other problems that confront our veterans.

We are a team of Americans, not Republican Americans or Democratic Americans but Americans committed to see our veterans get what they were promised.

As Senator BLUMENTHAL said, this bill addresses homelessness, it addresses women's health care issues, it addresses the possible passage of exposure to toxic waste in a hereditary fashion to the surviving children and grandchildren of our veterans, an obligation we owe to see to it that if there is any transfer of the exposure of those toxic substances, the VA benefits that go to the veteran also can be passed down to the child who is a victim of heredity through no fault of their own.

We do a lot on the court and the appeals. As Senator BLUMENTHAL said, we have a backlog of 450,000 appeals. We are adding two judges in the appeals process. We need to do more to expedite the appeals process.

This year I was personally disappointed that as close as we got to dealing with the administration and finding a solution, we still failed to say to our veterans: We are going to solve your problem of waiting in line.

Two weeks ago, I had the sad duty of breaking into tears in the living room of a home of a veteran in Marietta, GA. This is a veteran who has been trying for 3 years to get an appeal responded to and can't get it. He is a veteran whose life is about to end without ever getting an answer as to whether his appeal is justified. That is just not right.

We can find a way in this country to get the manpower and womanpower necessary, make the moral commitment that is imperative, and see that our veterans who have an appeal get an expeditious answer. Our veterans need to cooperate in that process by giving us all the backup data as fast as possible for every appeal they ask for. But it is not right for an appeal to last as long as the one that is before us in the U.S. Veterans Administration today, which is 25 years old. That's right, the oldest appeal in the Veterans Administration is 25 years old.

I am committed—and I make the commitment on the floor of the Senate today—to work with RICHARD, JON TESTER, the members of our committee, and everybody in this body to see to it that we say to the 450,000 veterans who are waiting on an appeal: We are going to get you an answer, and we are going to get it faster.

To those sons and daughters today who are signing up for the U.S. military, if you have a need for an appeal, we will see you get an expeditious answer. They deserve the very best. They deserve no less than a thorough answer in response to the appeal they have made.

The last 2 years, it has been a privilege and a pleasure for me for to work as chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. It has been a pleasure to work with RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, and I commend him on the contributions he has made. It has been equally great to

work with his staff, who have worked closely with us to see that we brought the best legislation possible to the floor of the Senate.

I particularly thank Tom Bowman, my chief of staff, who has made a lot of magic things happen during these last 2 years. But things have just begun in the Veterans' Committee of the Senate. We are going to work together to reach the dreams we all have to see to it that our veterans have seamless services and that we pay back to them what we owe them, equally what they have sacrificed and pledged for us—their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

I thank Senator BLUMENTHAL for his support and ask each of our Members in the Senate today to help us pass this downpayment on the promise and the debt we owe to the veterans of the United States of America.

I yield to the Senator from Pennsylvania.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Pennsylvania.

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MINERS PROTECTION ACT

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, I rise to speak tonight about the Miners Protection Act.

First, I commend and salute the work that has been done in this Chamber. I especially highlight the Senators on the Democratic side who have been working. I know this will not cover everyone, but I thank Senator MANCHIN, the senior Senator from West Virginia, Senator BROWN of Ohio, Senator WARNER of Virginia, and others, including the Democratic leadership, for working on this. I know we have bipartisan support on this issue. I thank our Republican colleagues who have worked on this.

Unfortunately, just today we are told that in the negotiations, in the back-and-forth on the continuing resolution, which we should be voting on this week—we are told that Majority Leader MCCONNELL is not going to include the Miners Protection Act in the continuing resolution. That is very bad news, especially when we consider how we arrived at this point in terms of bipartisan support. I will get to that in a moment.

Instead, apparently the proposal—or I guess at this point it might be beyond a proposal because it might be in a draft of the continuing resolution. Be that as it may, what has been proposed is 4 months of health care for miners and their families instead of a lifetime guarantee. In a word, that is unacceptable. I will not dwell on that because I want to get to the rest of our arguments on why this is a proposal we cannot accept.

A long time ago, before the turn of the last century, Stephen Crane, known mostly for the "Red Badge of Courage," a great novel, died at the

age of 28 or 29. But prior to his death, in addition to all that he wrote in a great novel, he wrote for McClure's magazine an essay about a coal mine near my hometown of Scranton in Lackawanna County. I come from a county that had of what they used to call hard coal, anthracite coal. It heated homes across the Nation and across the world, for not just years but generations.

Stephen Crane described how dangerous it was to work in a coal mine. He did it with such beauty and such skill, but there were so many horrible images. I, of course, will not read the entire essay, but at one place he described the coal mine as a place of "inscrutable darkness, a soundless place of tangible loneliness."

Then he described all the ways a miner could die in the mines. That was in the 1890s. Of course, coal mining today is safer, but still very dangerous. But no matter what the danger level, no matter what the circumstances of today, we owe these miners their health care, their pensions, and we owe their families.

What they don't want to hear, what we should not engage in, is the usual horse trading and kind of back-and-forth of Washington. They deserve the Miners Protection Act. It is not some theory, and it is not some idea; it is legislation that was introduced, debated, and then voted on by the Finance Committee, 18 to 8, a bipartisan vote in a place that sometimes cannot agree on the time of day, let alone something as substantive and as important as health care and pension benefits for those who earned them. This isn't some extra thing we are giving, not some gift we are giving; they earned it, in many cases not just for years but for decades they earned this. OK. We owe them this. This country owes them this. This Chamber owes this to these miners.

It was a promise a long time ago, in the late 1940s. These miners kept their promise. They went to work every day, year after year and decade after decade, and their families depended upon that promise. Some of them served in wars, including Vietnam, as just one example. They served in Vietnam and then worked in the mines again and worked and worked. So they kept their promise. They kept their promise to their family, they kept their promise to their country, and they kept their promise to their company.

Yet here we are once again, and the only ones left out are the miners. The companies will figure out a way to do OK. The country will move forward, the Senate will be just fine, but once again we stand at the precipice or at the threshold of a new time period. People are wanting to get out of here for the holidays, yet coal miners are not asking us to do anything other than keep a promise.

We should keep our promise, and the Republican majority leader should keep that promise. It is outrageous

that anyone would think it is appropriate to propose temporarily saving benefits when, in practice, these recipients would be notified almost simultaneously that they are both eligible for benefits—temporarily—and that their benefits will terminate. That is not just wrong; that is an insult. It is an insult to them and to their families.

Just imagine the stress of this. We cannot imagine it. I will answer my own question: We cannot imagine it. Probably no one in this building could imagine the stress on these individuals and their families. It is completely unnecessary.

I know we are limited on time tonight, but I wish to highlight portions of letters that I have received. I know the Senator from West Virginia has received even more because of his great advocacy, his work, and the substantial impact that the mining industry has had on his great State and the work that is done by great miners to this day.

To protect people in case we haven't received their permission, I will not use full names. This letter is from Waynesburg, PA, Southwestern Pennsylvania. I will limit it to a son talking about his mom. He said: "I am writing to you for my mother." He is asking us to vote on this bill. In the letter he says his mom is a widow. "She now lives on a fixed income. Her life depends on this passing," meaning, the bill passing. "She has cancer and will need surgery."

Her life depends on this bill passing. OK. This isn't just another bill about some far-off issue. That is a son writing to us from Waynesburg, PA, about his mom.

This is another letter from a son writing about both his parents, and I will provide just an excerpt. He writes that it would be "very comforting" to know his parents could "continue their current UMWA benefits until they can turn 65." He is worried about the fact that two parents are going to turn 65 in 2017, and he wants to make sure that they are protected.

The third and last letter I will read an excerpt from is from a miner himself from Johnstown, PA. It is a town I know pretty well in Cambria County. There has been a lot of mining there over many years. He is talking about working the mines for 21 years. He said: "When you make a promise it should be kept."

That is what a miner from Johnstown, who worked in the mines for 21 years, reminds us. It is just what I said: "A promise should be kept." It continues, "This insurance has gotten me and my wife through many health concerns including breast cancer in which my wife still fights today."

Then he talks about how this would dramatically change their access to doctors and medical care.

So we are not talking about some budget number here; we are talking about a family telling us the life of their mother depends upon it; another

family member whose mom has breast cancer, her life—or at least her health care at this point—depends upon it. So this isn't theory.

This legislation, which passed the Finance Committee, as I said, 18 to 8—all we have to do is have the majority leader stand up and say that we are going to attach this to the continuing resolution and have the House Speaker say the same because they have control. That is all they have to do—attach it to the continuing resolution—and we will finally have kept our promise.

Temporary relief is not only insufficient, it is an insult. It is not just insufficient, it is dead wrong.

No one here should be playing games with people's ability to pay for medication, pay for their oxygen. That shouldn't be the subject of games or horse trading.

We delivered in both parties. We delivered to Majority Leader MCCONNELL everything he asked for—committee consideration, debate and vote in the committee—and now it has come to the floor of the U.S. Senate. It is time for all of us to keep our promise to coal miners and to make the Miners Protection Act permanent law and to keep our promise to those miners and their families.

I again commend and salute the Senator from West Virginia, and I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from West Virginia.

Mr. MANCHIN. Mr. President, I wish to thank my dear friend from Pennsylvania, my neighbor State, for his commitment to the hard-working people who made this country what it is today.

There are a lot of people who don't know the history of how we are the superpower of the world, how we won two world wars, how we energized the whole industrial age, and how we built the middle class. It came because of the domestic energy that we basically extracted right here in America and it was done by mine workers. My grandfather came to this country as a young child in the early 1900s, and his family came here to find a better life. On both sides—I had one set of grandparents who came from Czechoslovakia and the other set came from Italy, and both sides ended up in the coal mines, as well as all of my uncles and cousins. We had these little coal camps all over the area where I grew up in Farmington, WV.

I was so proud of my heritage. I will never forget my Boy Scout leader was Pat Keener. He was a coal miner. When the coal mines automated in 1959, he had to go and find a job in Ohio in the auto industry. My Little League coach was a coal miner—everybody I knew. The hunting and fishing clubs were all coal miners who took all of us and showed us how to do things and enjoy the outdoors.

It is just an unbelievable network of people, and most all of them were military. Most all of them were veterans.

They continued to serve their country when they left the mines and went to the military and came back to the mines.

So I rise with a heavy heart because I thought we had this fixed. I thought this was something we had done—and Senator CASEY laid it out so well. We have done everything we can. This day has been coming for quite some time. I warned everybody 2 years ago that this finite time would come December 31 of this year. We started working in earnest quite a while ago. We were told to go through the regular order, as Senator CASEY said, to do the things we were supposed to do. It got its full purview, if you will, and it passed bipartisanly. Everyone is sympathetic. Everyone knows the hard work that is done and how dangerous it is.

My uncle on my mom's side got killed in the 1968 mine explosion in Farmington. I lost a lot of kids I went to school with, classmates, so it has been very near and dear to me.

As Governor of West Virginia, the Sago Mine disaster, I lost 12 miners there. We had the Logan Mine disaster, and I lost two people there, and then we had the UBB, and we lost 29 people. So I have been through it. I know how dangerous and tough this business is, but I know the country depends on them. We can't run without them.

I want to make sure everyone understands that this was never intended for the government or the taxpayers to pay. It never was. It wasn't set up that way. In 1946, John L. Lewis basically said we are going to go on strike. We are pulling everybody out. This was after World War II. The economy had been ramped up because it was 100 percent employment. We were producing and consuming because of the war effort. When that happened, the economy started heading down. He said: Oh, no. We have to keep this economy going. We can't let this tail off. They said: Listen, from the beginning of the 20th century until 1946—46 years—these miners have done back-breaking work. We have heard the old adage "I owe my soul to the company store." My grandfather told me that when he worked in the mines in the early 1920s, he had four children and was expecting his fifth child, and he said at the end of the day, he had no money. All the script was at the company store. He had to borrow everything there, and at the end of the month, he owed them for working, trying to make it. He had no health care. There was a doctor who helped them a little bit. They had no pension or retirement. They worked until they died, and that was the way it was.

In 1946, they said: Enough is enough. You shouldn't work this hard and so many people benefit. You helped build a country and you get nothing. So they said from that day forward—and that was the Krug amendment that was signed—and by the blessings of the U.S. President, Harry S. Truman. Then they said, from that day forward: All the

coal that we mine, a percentage of that coal or the money on that percentage of coal, would go into a black lung fund and then it would go into the AML fund and then it would go into basically the miners health care and retirement—a portion of that.

So it wasn't coming from taxpayers; it was coming from the work they were producing. That is where this came from.

So everything is going fine. Then, basically, Congress passed bankruptcy laws that allowed companies to go and declare bankruptcy and basically divest themselves of all of their responsibilities to the people who worked for them. This was done to them. We had the 74 plant and the 92 plant.

So we dealt with something that was not their making. These people negotiated contracts in good faith by bargaining, and they would give away salary or money that could have been in their pocket because they knew they were going to get guaranteed health care, and now here we stand basically saying: I am sorry. That is not going to happen. You are going to lose your pension and health care.

We have over 16,000 who will lose their health care benefits by the end of this year, less than 4 weeks away—16,000. Senator CASEY read some letters, and I am going to read some letters as well.

What we are doing here is we are holding up—and I know it affects everybody's hard work. This is something that is not easy for me. I have never done this. I have been here 6 years. I have never used this procedure, but I have never felt so committed and so beholden to people who have given so much. We are talking 60-, 70-, and 80-year-old women. Most of the husbands have died; they are still depending on this. The little clinics we have in the coal communities around West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania, those coal communities and coal camps and basically those little clinics will not survive. This has a ripple effect.

Now, I understand they are going to give us a 4-month extension—4 months. Let me tell my colleagues what these people are going through. They were told the 1st of October they will lose their benefits of health care; 16,000 were sent letters telling them they will lose them by the end of this year. Now, what we are about to do—which I believe is totally inhumane—we are about to now send them another letter, if passed the way it is going to be presented to us in the CR, that says: I am sorry, Mrs. Smith. I know we told you that you are going to lose your health care on December 1, but now we are going to tell you that in January we will send you another letter and tell you, you are going to lose it in April.

Now, you tell me if there is anything fair about that. You tell me how you face people who have given everything, and now we are just going to extend it for another 4 months with no certainty that anything will continue from there.

We are asking for a permanent fix. We have a pay-for for that permanent fix. It is the excess we have, surplus in the AML money, but everybody has other plans for that. Well, guess what. The people who need it have plans also, to try to keep themselves alive. That is the plan they have, and that is what they are asking for.

I haven't ever used this tactic before, but I feel so compelled that I said we are going to do whatever we can to keep this promise. We have asked for the health care—this had a health care and pension provision. It has only the health care provision right now because we understand that we worked and we negotiated and we said this is something we felt we needed now because they had a finite time—at the end of this month. We will work on the pensions next year, too, to make sure they are going to be preserved.

That being said, I have gotten letters, the same as everybody else in coal country where we come from. Here is one: Dear Senator MANCHIN, without action I, along with thousands of other coal miners and widows of coal miners, will lose our health care on December 31. My husband died in 2012 of pancreatic cancer. He also had black lung. He loved his job even though it was so dangerous. He worked to ensure that we had good health benefits not just for me but for him and our family. I am asking Congress to please do the right thing and don't let us lose our health care benefits.

I have another letter. This is from Carol Turek. Carol writes: My husband worked in the mines with blockages in his brain until he had enough time. He worked even though he was that ill so that I would have insurance if something happened to him, knowing that he was very ill. He retired in 2009 and he passed away in 2011. He was a good worker. He stayed over and worked days off when needed and this is how they thank him in return. How is an older person supposed to live when they take away your retirement, take away your insurance, and never give you raises in Social Security? Everything raises and medical is outrageous. I guess when you are old, they expect you to crawl into a corner and die. Well, I pray every day that God gives me another day, and I am praying that they pass this health care provision so that others and myself can live just a little bit longer.

I have another one. She says: Dear Senator MANCHIN and all of you who are trying to help us. My husband Charles passed away on October 12 from cancer. Patriot Coal filed bankruptcy before Charles passed away. He told me that if they took his medical coverage, that he would not go to the doctor because he didn't want to leave me in debt if he didn't get medical coverage, so he didn't want to go to the doctor. My income was cut almost 75 percent when Charles passed away. Charles was promised these benefits for us both. He worked all of those years in

coal dust to help supply this country with the energy that it needed. I pray that our government will pass this bill to help the thousands that will be affected by not having health care. Some people will choose to buy medicine instead of food. This is so sad and coal miners worked in the mines and risked their lives for so long. Some people that have never worked can get help under the new health care law, so why not help the ones who have worked and paid for it? Why can't they get what they are supposed to get? I am proud to be an American and daughter, sister, wife, and mother of coal miners.

I have one here that explains it very well. She says: Dear Senator. I have dedicated my life to a career in nursing in Boone County, WV. My husband developed kidney disease and heart disease at an early age. He did not smoke, drink, nor do drugs. Doing his work he developed an autoimmune. He worked very sick for 30 years underground in the coal industry as an electrician in the mines and maintenance worker. He was an educated man but he loved working with his hands. After coming out of the U.S. Air Force when he worked in the World Communication Agency as a cryptographic specialist in the White House, he chose to go into the mines as a career because of the reliable future, retirement, and health benefits that it assured for his family. Rick worked hard every day and during the last 15 years that he worked he would sometimes travel over 45 minutes away and take chemotherapy treatments to treat his kidney disease while he was still working. He had heart disease as a result of those treatments. So many heart studies, the stent, and the bypass surgery followed along with the continued renal disease. All of those years he worked in the mines to provide electricity to so many who worked other jobs, were comfortable in their homes, sitting at their desks, not risking life or limb for the luxuries afforded them by the coal miners who had been promised health and retirement benefits if they took less pay, did not strike for same, and continued providing the valuable coal resources this country needed.

Continuing: After educating me to beyond my Master's level; putting a girl through medical school, and another daughter to Master's level in teacher education—we depleted many of our financial resources to do this, knowing we had "secure retirement and health" planned for through his union. During the last 1½ years of his life, after retirement, Rick died of leukemia that developed from many years of chemical treatments for his autoimmune kidney disease. Meanwhile, I worked 26 years as a school nurse plus additional years as a registered nurse, planning to utilize my husband's percentage of retirement and health benefits to secure my own retirement.

Continuing: When the courts of this land allowed bankrupting companies to fold on their commitments to our min-

ers, that has become a frightening and impossible situation for myself, a widow, and many more in my same situation. Devastation is the only word that can be used to describe the trickle down effect it will have on so many other businesses and health agencies, if this congressional action does not carry through to secure our union miners, retirees, and widows. You are not only destroying the 12,000 plus miners and widows involved, you are destroying huge infrastructures and businesses that depend upon the income and health benefits where these individuals are served. Please note, only the "union" miners contributed to these funds, not the nonunion miners who chose much higher wages opposed to the union wages and structure. Please consider this so we can go into Christmas knowing we have the security of the fund being stabilized. Some will have no way out; some individuals will literally not survive without the needed health care and pensions they worked and sacrificed their health to obtain. Thank you, Sue Peros, Wife of Bert Ricky Peros, South Charleston, WV.

We have many more.

The thing I want to emphasize is that these are real people. This is not just something we are fabricating. These are people who work every day. These are people still living, still contributing, still taking care of their families, still depending on health care. The ripple effect is unbelievable. To sit here and say we are going to pass a CR because we want to go home for Christmas or to say we have the comfort of being home and we have 16,000 miners, retired—we have their widows and families depending on health care, and they have been told they are going to lose it December 31, but we are in a hurry to leave. We just can't wait to leave. We have got to get out of here. Well, I am sorry, that is not the way we do it back home. That is not how we treat our friends and neighbors and especially not how we treat our miners.

I am asking all of you to work with us to make sure we get a permanent fix. That is all I am asking for. We have a way to do this with the surplus AML funds to pay for that, money that was made for mining the coal to be used for this. That is what we are asking for. That is what we promised them. That is what we owe them.

I thank all of my colleagues, each and every one, for being so considerate. We have bipartisan support.

I will say this: If this were a standalone bill on this floor, it would pass. This bill on this floor would pass, with Democrats and Republicans working together. It would also pass in the House. But that is not the case. We can't get a standalone bill. We have what we have. We are asking for the compassion of our leaders on both sides of the aisle here to give us a clean, long-term fix for health care for the retired miners as promised.

Mr. President, I yield the floor to my dear friend from Ohio.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I thank Senator MANCHIN for driving this issue. It was done better with him than without him. I thank him for making a world of difference and Senator CASEY for his impassioned pleas and reading the letters from mine workers, retired mine workers, widows, retired mine workers in Western Pennsylvania and all over West Virginia and Southeast Ohio. We are all getting letters in our offices that are heartfelt and just make me wonder, why aren't we doing something?

I want to share a letter from a lady in Gallipolis, OH, a village. I was just there in the community of Rio Grande earlier this week. She wrote a letter to MITCH MCCONNELL, who is, frankly, the single person standing in the way of doing this.

Dear Leader Mitch McConnell:

Just to inform you as a member of UMWA that it is vitally important that we keep our insurance.

My Husband (Larry) worked 35 years as a miner. He has had bypass surgery this last Aug 8, 2016, also has black lung—COPD—chronic idiopathic gout, acute bronchitis . . .

And other things.

I have history of cardiomyopathy and congestive heart failure. . . . We need members of all Congress to consider all that the Coal Miners has contribution to the welfare of this country. Now we ask that they remember commitments made to the Coal Miners. Please keep that promise made to the Coal Miners.

Over and over: Please keep that promise made to the coal miners. But instead we hear all kinds of excuses. Again, one man—the majority leader of the Senate, the Republican Senator from Kentucky—one man standing in the way.

Senator MANCHIN just said that if this came to a vote right now on the Senate floor, it would easily have enough votes to pass, but one man has blocked this in the continuing resolution. He has kind of distributed—dropped a few crumbs to a few miners for a few weeks on health care but not pensions. But it is one man standing in the way.

When I look at the other Senators—the two Senators from Pennsylvania, one Democrat, one Republican; two Senators from West Virginia, one Democrat, one Republican; two Senators from Ohio, one Democrat, one Republican; two Senators from Virginia, both Democrats—all of them want to move on this, but we keep hearing excuses from one man, the majority leader of the Senate, from Kentucky.

We were told by the majority leader we need bipartisan support. Well, we got it, the bill cosponsored by Republicans and Democrats. As Senator MANCHIN said, if it were brought up to a vote, we could pass it tonight.

Then we were told the bill needs to go through regular order, which is a way, in Washington-speak, of simply

saying: Send it to a committee, examine it, debate it, bring a couple witnesses in, bring in experts, talk about it. We did that.

Senators WARNER and CASEY and I also, on the Finance Committee, helped get this bill through with a bipartisan vote of 18 to 8—not even close. Again, the Republican Senators from Pennsylvania and Ohio joined the Democratic Senators from those two States. Eighteen to eight.

Then we were told by the majority leader—the one man who is stopping this—find a pay-for. Find a way to pay for it. We did. The bill is fully offset. As Senator MANCHIN said, as Senator CASEY said, as a number have said, this does not cost taxpayers a dime. This isn't a bank bailout that cost real dollars. This isn't even the auto rescue, which was so important to my State. That cost real dollars, although the money was paid back. This won't cost taxpayers anything. The Congressional Budget Office estimates it would reduce the Federal deficit by \$67 million over 10 years because they would get the right kind of health care rather than having to rely on other kinds of government programs.

These miners—again, we keep saying this over and over. They have done everything we have asked them to do.

Almost seven decades ago, President Truman made this commitment. We have lived up to this commitment through Presidents of both parties, including this President, Barack Obama, but one person—again, one person—has stood in the way. The miners in my State can't afford to have this reduced to political gamesmanship. They are hard-working people. They spent their careers doing dignified work.

I remember when we spoke at the rally on a really hot day earlier this year. There were thousands of miners there. I remember Cecil Roberts, the president of the United Mine Workers, stood up and said: Put your hand up if you are a veteran.

Hundreds of hands went up.

He said: Put your hand up if your father or mother was a veteran.

Again, hundreds more hands went up.

These are people who served their country. And those who weren't off to war were producing the coal to produce the electricity to power the war machine, whether it was World War II or Korea or Vietnam or anything since.

Not taking up the mine workers protection act is violating the promise made by President Truman, violating the promise we all made. The bill should ride on the continuing resolution. The majority party has the ability to make that happen right now.

I was talking a moment ago quietly, privately, with Senator CASEY. We were talking about—unlike the spouses of insurance agents or realtors or teachers or Senators or bankers, mine workers are much more likely to die at a younger age. When you talk about so many, by any cross section, by any analysis of who is most in need of this

kind of help, mine workers—there are a lot more mine worker widows than there are in other professions because of the danger of the work. There is a much greater likelihood of dying on the job, much greater likelihood of getting hurt on the job, much greater likelihood in later years of developing brown lung and developing various kinds of heart ailments and bronchial ailments because they worked in the mines. That makes it an even more fundamental moral question, that we do something about this.

How many mine workers are sick and need health care? How many need these pensions? How many mine workers die and their widows need this help? And we sit here doing nothing.

I just say again to Leader MCCONNELL: Get out of the way. Just let this come to an up-or-down—however you want to do this, however you want to schedule this, however you want to move this through the Senate, we should be doing it now. We shouldn't go home for our Christmas break until we take care of these miners. It is the right, moral thing to do. It is the right thing for our country. It is a promise we made, a pledge we made. We should honor it, starting this evening.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. DAINES). Without objection, it is so ordered.

MONTENEGRO MEMBERSHIP IN NATO

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Mr. President, today the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the resolution to allow Montenegro to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. I am here this afternoon to urge that the full Senate take up this issue and give a prompt vote to the accession before we bring the 114th Congress to a close.

A top priority of the historic NATO summit that happened in Warsaw in July was bolstering the alliance's resolve and capacity to deter Russian aggression against the Baltic States and the rest of NATO's eastern flank. Also at the Warsaw summit, NATO formally invited Montenegro to become its 29th member nation. All 28 member states must now ratify the accession protocol according to our own procedures. In the United States, that means the Senate must ratify the protocol.

In the decades since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been a tremendous force for stability, democratization, and freedom in Europe. That is exactly why more countries, including those created by the breakup of Yugoslavia, are eager to join.

Montenegro has worked hard to prove its commitment to NATO, including by strengthening its democ-

racy, making significant progress in fighting corruption, and improving its defense capabilities. Montenegro's membership in NATO would have significant impact, including completing the alliance's unbroken control of the Adriatic coast. It will serve to further anchor the Balkan region in the security framework of NATO.

It speaks volumes that Vladimir Putin has fiercely opposed Montenegro's accession to NATO. During Montenegro's general election in October, authorities arrested 20 people suspected of plotting, with support from Russia, to overthrow the Cabinet and assassinate Montenegro's Prime Minister, Milo Djukanovic. While NATO is purely a defensive alliance, Russia has warned Montenegro of retaliation if the country continues to pursue NATO membership. By quickly approving the resolution on accession, the Senate can demonstrate that it stands firmly with Montenegro and that we will not allow Putin to bully European states with impunity.

Montenegro's membership would reaffirm that NATO's door remains open to aspirant nations that share the values of all NATO members and stand ready to contribute to NATO operations. NATO must stand firm on the principle that the decision to seek membership in the alliance cannot be blocked by a third party.

NATO is the most ambitious and successful alliance in history. Across nearly seven decades, it has risen to every challenge: deterring the Soviet Union during the Cold War; integrating former Soviet bloc countries into a Europe whole and free; restoring peace in the Balkans after Yugoslavia's breakup; invoking article 5 in defense of the United States after September 11; and most recently, taking the fight to the Islamic State terrorist group in Syria and Iraq.

Montenegro is a small nation with big strategic importance. Its accession to NATO would strengthen the alliance. In turn, membership in NATO would bolster Montenegro's democracy and independence.

As I said, today the Foreign Relations Committee approved the resolution of accession. I hope the full Senate will bring the resolution to the floor for a prompt, favorable vote. The United States has always stood strong for freedom and democracy in Europe, and it is time to stand strong for freedom and democracy in Montenegro.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. GARDNER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 3084

Mr. GARDNER. Mr. President, I am pleased to come to the floor tonight to

talk about a bill, S. 3084, the American Innovation and Competitiveness Act. This is a piece of legislation that has taken several years of patience, perseverance, a lot of hard work, and testimony from both sides of the aisle.

I am pleased that Senator PETERS from Michigan and I have finally been able to come up with a product that has the strongest bipartisan support in both the Senate and the House. This is an effort that builds on the America COMPETES legislation. America COMPETES was first passed over a decade ago as an effort to make the United States more competitive economically, an effort to make sure we had the skills and our workers, the STEM force education to compete with nations around the world as global competition increases, as other nations try to gain an advantage over the United States in their manufacturing processes and in their innovation processes.

The America COMPETES legislation arose from a report that was put together by a group of individuals—very smart business leaders, scientists—known as the “Rising Above the Gathering Storm” report, the “RAGS” report, the idea being, how are we going to make sure the United States remains competitive and how do we make sure we have the education programs we need in this country to gear the next-generation workforce for a more competitive environment? So we put together this bill, a bipartisan bill, passing it out of the Commerce Committee for the first time in a decade—the America COMPETES legislation—to renew this policy effort.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 695, S. 3084. I further ask that the committee-reported substitute amendment be withdrawn; the Gardner substitute amendment be agreed to; the bill, as amended, be considered read a third time and passed; and that the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Ohio.

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, this legislation sounds pretty good. It is bipartisan, but I also know that in my State there are more than 1,000 retired mine workers and their widows. We know that people who have worked in the mines for 30, 35, or 40 years are more likely to be sick and die younger. These 1,000-plus mine workers have been denied their pensions. Their pensions and health care have been threatened. Many of them are widows of mine workers. Yet, we have bipartisan support. It passed out of the Finance Committee 16 to 8, and Senator MCCONNELL—one person in this body—has blocked the mine workers pension and health care legislation for weeks and weeks and months and months.

I would be very happy to support and help Senator GARDNER in this legisla-

tion, the American Innovation and Competitiveness Act. I hope he will speak to the Republican leader and ask him to do the right thing to help these pensioners, widows, and mine workers whose pensions are threatened and whose health care is about to be cut off.

Mr. President, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Colorado.

Mr. GARDNER. Mr. President, again, I want to reiterate that this legislation, the America COMPETES bill, is a bipartisan product. We have spent countless hours working with people from around the country to come up with a bill that focuses on giving workers and employees the skills they need to succeed.

I understand the objection of the Senator from Ohio, which is based on the need to move forward with the legislation they are talking about, but it is my understanding that there is at least an effort to work on that legislation, which would provide some time to come up with a longer term solution providing an extension of the health care coverage they have been seeking for some time, although not the entire benefit package they were hoping would be extended under the legislation they were also talking about.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I can't exactly speak for my colleagues, but I know a number of Senators on this side of the aisle will be pleased to work with the Senator on this legislation, and I am hopeful we can do both in the days ahead.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Colorado.

Mr. GARDNER. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Ohio.

One of the challenges we have, of course, is the calendar, as this reaches toward the end. Again, I am committed to stay here as long as we can to fix this and make this work. I do worry about our colleagues across the hallway and their calendar and making sure that they are finding the time to process this legislation, along with the legislation that the Senator from Ohio is concerned about.

Again, I think this is something that we ought to be able to move on as we address the concerns of the Senator from Ohio—and the concerns that I think, at least to some degree, will be addressed in the continuing resolution—and to continue to work on legislation that is truly bipartisan and beneficial from a standpoint of providing more resources for manufacturing partnerships, more resources for commercialization efforts, additional resources for STEM education, and having more underrepresented minority community members involved in STEM education fields. These are things I think we can work on, and this place has to have the ability to work together on efforts that the Senator from Ohio is so concerned

about and also the efforts that we have through the America COMPETES legislation. I believe we can do both.

I understand the objection, and I appreciate the offer and willingness to work together. But I know when you have a House and a Senate that work under two different calendars, one of which is under our control—again, let's stay here until we get this done. There is one calendar that is out of our control, and I just hope we can move forward on this because all 50 States do benefit from the bipartisan work we have been able to put forward on the American Innovation and Competitiveness Act.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I appreciate those words. I also recognize that we have not seen a continuing resolution yet. There is a rumor that it has 4 months of health care but it doesn't have any pension assistance, and there is nothing about fully funding their pension and continuing with their health care. They have already gotten a notice saying their health care will be terminated. If we continue this for 4 months, they will get another notice in January. That is all hearsay because we still have not seen the bill.

I know we are working on separate calendars. I understand that, and maybe the House is going to take the ball and go home, showing a real maturity in its leadership. The fact is we need to stay here. I don't know why we need to get out and go home for Christmas tomorrow or even Friday. I think we should stay here until we finish. We have been here until December 24 before. I am fine with that. I want to be home. I have a wife whom I love and kids and grandchildren, and I want to see them all, but I want to take care of these miners.

Show us a bill. Let's talk about it, negotiate this, and follow regular order. I believe we had an 18-to-8 vote on taking care of this health care for miners. We can honor what Senator GARDNER, the Senator from Colorado, wants to do. I am fine with doing that, but we are not going to do any of those things until we take care of the miners. We have an obligation to them that President Truman had begun with a pledge. It is morally reprehensible to betray that commitment to 12,000 retired miners and their widows in the country.

I want to do all of that, and I know Senator GARDNER does too. It is up to my colleagues to push the majority leader, who, for whatever reason, is blocking this and is continuing to block our ability to do this. We should stay here until it is finished.

I yield the floor.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. GARDNER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.